JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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Jump Cut was founded as a print publication by John Hess, Chuck Kleinhans, and Julia Lesage in Bloomington, Indiana, and published its first issue in1974. It was conceived as an alternative publication of media criticism—emphasizing left, feminist, and LGBTQ perspectives. It evolved into an online publication in 2001, bringing all its back issues with it.

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JUMP CUT

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- Cinque, Toija, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond, eds. *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/ Time/ Body/Memory*.
- Grant, Charles L., Geoffrey Marsh, and Victoria Broackes, eds. *David Bowie Is*.
- Hawkins, Joan, ed. *Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975-2001*.
- Smith, Patti. *Just Kids*.

Are personal documentaries also ethnographic films?
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Talkin' to us: Jon Jost's *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes*
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[Little hopes and pleasures: revisiting Tanner's *Jonah* (1976)]
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[Does visibility equal progress? A conversation between Sam Feder and Alexandra Juhasz on trans activist media]
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Binging on Greyson
Greg Youmans' review of the work of John Greyson and a critical study of it:

- *Impatient: John Greyson DVD Box Set* (dist. VTape, 2012);
- *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*, ed. Brenda Longfellow, Scott MacKenzie, and Thomas Waugh.

A career-spanning DVD box set and a new critical anthology provide a welcome opportunity to trace the formal innovations, recurring themes, and political commitments of John Greyson's three-plus decades of film and video production.

Queer Film Classics
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- Greg Youmans, *Word Is Out*.
- Thomas Waugh & Jason Garrison, *Montreal Main*.
- Julia Mendenhall, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*

Talking Trash
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Jon Davies, *Trash* (Queer Film Classic series). Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009
Tour guide to the film.

Ethnic Notions. Tongues Untied. Mainstream and margins
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Listening to the heartbeat: interview with Marlon Riggs
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reprinted from *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* no. 36 (1991)

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Greening out
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The book investigates the consequences of the information and communication technology (ICT) production circuit on the environment and human beings while proposing alternatives to green the media for a more sustainable future.

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***Women & Film* (1972-1975)**

THE LAST WORD

Mourning in America

#BlackLivesMatter

Learning: All Together Now

Memorial for John Hess

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Netflix's geek-chic: how one company leveraged its big data to change the entertainment industry

by Tricia Jenkins



Reed Hastings, co-founder of Netflix.



Big data refers to data sets that are received at such a high volume that they require an elaborate system of collection and analysis to fully understand them.



In early 2015, Netflix boasted over sixty million subscribers in fifty different countries and announced its plans to be operational in every single country by the end of the following year. The company, as its name suggests, offers its members a large array of film and television content, through either a DVD mail-subscription service or a digital streaming membership for a low monthly cost. While its DVD library is certainly more exhaustive than its digital one, Netflix's streaming service still offers its members thousands of different titles depending on the region and is so popular in North America that in 2014 it accounted for 34% of all traffic using downstream bandwidth (Govind).

If there is a thesis that summarizes Netflix's history and development, it is that the company has always been a dangerous game changer for its competition in the entertainment industry. First, its Internet-based movie rental service challenged brick-and-mortar stores, eventually leading to the demise of its primary nemesis —Blockbuster. Now, Netflix is posing a threat to subscription television networks, such as Showtime and HBO, as it has recently begun to commission original content similar in quality and style. However, Netflix Originals have the added advantage of being released an entire season at a time, as opposed to the linear schedule that its competition uses—a major plus for the on-demand generation who loves to watch as much as it wants, when it wants. Furthermore, plans are already in the works for Netflix to challenge movie theaters as the dominant exhibition hub for new release films as the company continues to strike exclusive deals with major Hollywood talent.

A second thesis about the company's growth and success, however, might consider Netflix's unusual focus on big data. By definition, big data is data that surpasses the processing capacity of conventional database systems and is received at such a high volume that it requires an elaborate system of collection and analysis to fully understand it. Using programs such as Hadoop, Pig, Python, Cassandra, Hive, Presto, Teradata and Redshift, Netflix is able to process 10+ petabytes of data along with 400+ billion new events on a daily basis in order to learn about its users' viewing habits (Wylie). This data contains numbers about how many people are using the service at a particular time, what texts those viewers are watching, how viewers rate the programs they've watched, and what sort of device they've accessed Netflix from (there are over 1,000 options). The company, however, also logs a plethora of surprisingly minute and individualized activity. It tracks at what precise point in a film a viewer paused or stopped watching. It tracks when a viewer fast-forwards or re-winds through a scene, and through algorithms, its data scientists can learn what kind of scene that was (something sexy? something violent? something starring Nordic hunk Alexander

The ability to watch multiple episodes of a brand new series, back-to-back-to-back, is one of the obvious advantages of Netflix's platform and its delivery strategy.

Skarsgard?) It also tracks what types of programs subscribers watch on different days of the week, what programs are popular in particular zip codes, and what color browsing poster a viewer is most likely to select from the home recommendation screen.

From Netflix's standpoint, the collection and analysis of big data is key to its business success. The company depends on being able to deliver a highly personalized recommendation system to its subscribers and to make well-informed content acquisition decisions. But its dependence on big data has also significantly changed the way that media texts are consumed, produced, exhibited, and valued, causing profound disruptions in the entertainment industry. But surprisingly, little academic attention has been paid to the role of big data in the entertainment industry. Part of the problem is that companies like Netflix protect their proprietary data by restricting its access to those who work inside of the company (with the exception of the Netflix Prize, as discussed later). Indeed as Boyd and Crawford write, most media companies prohibit access to their data sets by non-employees while others will sell some data for a fee.

> "This produces considerable unevenness in the system: those with money—or those inside the company—can produce a different type of research than those outside. …."
>
> "[T]hose without access can neither reproduce nor evaluate the methodological claims of those who have privileged access (673)."



Mark Randolph is sometimes called the forgotten co-founder of Netflix, but he was instrumental in shaping its early success.

In other words, because Netflix refuses to release its algorithmic formulas and data sets, academic researchers have had very limited access to data about the company's viewers so as to evaluate how viewer behavior is affecting industry shifts. That doesn't mean, however, that nothing can be known about relations between big data, Netflix, and industry changes. Indeed, by drawing on tech reports, recent literature, interviews and public talks with Netflix and other industry executives, I explore here big data's role throughout the major stages of Netflix's corporate development. My goal is to understand how data collection has helped the company disrupt almost every aspect of the media production cycle and to assess what the potential effects on the industry might be. While my research is necessarily limited by Netflix's data restrictions, I nonetheless attempt to provide a foundational production-economy perspective on one of today's game-changing entertainment companies.

In the beginning: big data, red envelopes and Cinematch

Netflix was the brainchild of two Silicon Valley business partners, Reed Hastings and Mark Randolph, who wanted to create "the next Amazon.com of something" in the late 1990s (Keating 13). To many the duo seemed an unlikely pair in the business venture world, with Hastings possessing a colder "supercomputer mind" that thrived on perfecting business plans, while Randolph excelled as a more charismatic leader who used his talents to sell his products to others (15).

Eventually, the pair agreed to develop an Internet-based, movie subscription service that rented DVDs to customers through the mail in its now famous red envelopes. To first get their start-up off the ground, however, Hastings and Randolph had to figure out how to convince customers to abandon their local, familiar video store for one that only existed in cyberspace and took several days to deliver a movie. Their plan revolved around four basic principles: boast the largest selection of videos in the world, let subscribers keep their movies as long as they wanted without ever suffering a late fee, deliver products reliably and



The now famous red envelopes of Netflix's mail-based subscription service

quickly, and eventually, create a highly personalized recommendation system that could outperform the video store clerk.

Hastings' penchant for computer algorithms also meant that big data would be central to Netflix's business plan from the very start. For example, when the data revealed that Netflix's ability to deliver a film to consumers within 24 hours had an undeniable correlation to an increased rate of new customer sign ups in that same area, it dramatically changed its distribution plan. Rather than continue to ship all of its DVDs from a single warehouse in San Jose, California, the company developed a software program that plugged in each of its customers' addresses to see where it should build not just one, but multiple distribution centers to allow for most subscribers to get their DVDs within 24 hours of Netflix shipping the order. At the time, the multi-center fulfillment structure was somewhat radical in the business world, but it ultimately proved a success as the faster delivery times eventually led to word-of-mouth advertising and a reduced cost associated with signing up new subscribers (Keating 56-57).

Such meticulous attention to shipment speeds explains why Gian Gonzaga, Director of Data Science at Netflix, argues that during the mail-order stage of the company's development, it wasn't really an entertainment company:

> "it was a logistics company that just happened to sell entertainment."

Its primary business questions centered around which titles it needed to stock, how many of those titles it needed in its inventory, and what the best way was to get those titles to the right person in the right amount of time.

But within three years of going live, Netflix realized that shipping speeds and a growing catalog would simply not be enough. When Netflix first started, it did not provide its viewers with a recommendation feature. All it offered was a search engine that could locate films by keywords, provide links to movie ratings and synopses, and allow users to enter a favorite film in order to find similar titles. When Netflix's catalog offered less than a thousand titles, this system worked reasonably well. But as their catalog grew, Hastings said a recommendation system became "critical" because "people have limited cognitive time they want to spend on picking a movie" (Thompson). The company also knew that it would need to create an engine that could outperform the video clerk, who was able to give customers ideas about what they might like to watch in order to keep business active.

To do this, Netflix started by asking subscribers who rented a movie to rate it and then used this data to make future recommendations by comparing highly rated films to other ones in their catalog with similar attributes (such as genre, theme or talent). The only problem, according to Hastings, was that this early system gave "a mix of insightful and bonehead recommendations" and ultimately proved ineffective at predicting customer preferences (Thompson). For instance, its engineers could not figure out why *Pretty Woman* and *American Gigolo* rarely appealed to the same audiences "even though both were movies about prostitution, starring Richard Gere, and set in a major U.S. city" (Keating 191).

To improve their recommendation system, the company turned to its big data engineers who began to cluster customers together who rated movies similarly and to then present "films highly rated by cluster members to others in the same cluster" (62). By doing this, Netflix's recommendation system, called Cinematch, could tease out some fairly nuanced connections that few Blockbuster video clerks could ever know. For example, it found that people who enjoy the historical war movie *The Patriot* also tend to like *Pearl Harbor*, but it also discovered that those very same folks also like the science-fiction movie *I, Robot* and the emotional drama *Pay It Forward* (Thompson).



In 2006, Netflix announced a contest that offered one million dollars to anyone who could improve its Cinematch system by 10%.



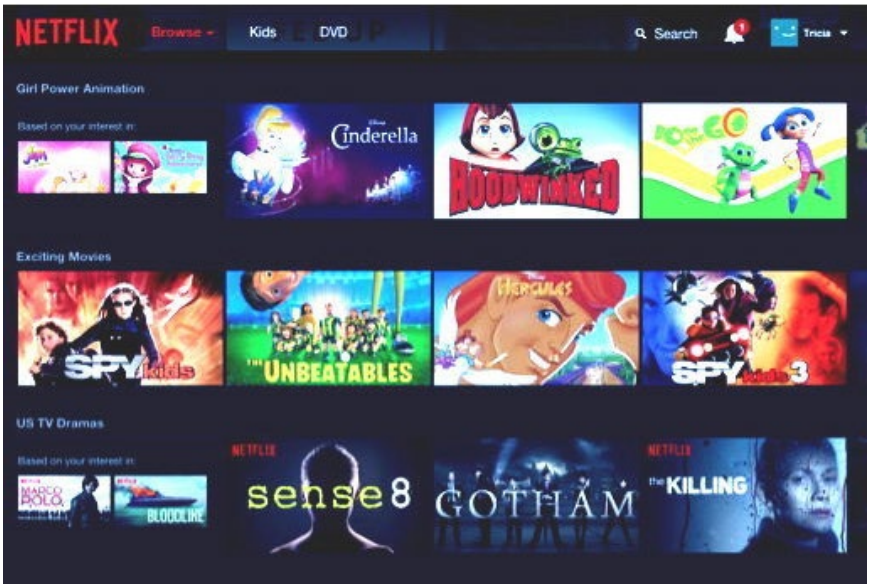
Napoleon Dynamite proved to be too perplexing for data scientists, who could never reliably predict how viewers would rate this film.

To make further advances, Netflix placed even more trust in the power of data scientists when it announced an open-door contest in 2006 that offered one million dollars to anyone who could improve the Cinematch system by 10%. In the Netflix world, that translated into consistently predicting a subscriber's movie ratings to within one half to three-quarters star on Netflix's five-star system (Keating 187). Over 40,000 teams or individuals from 186 countries joined the three-year contest, using Netflix's data set of one million subscriber movie ratings to test their equations (188). In the end, a team called Belkor's Pragmatic Chaos took home the grand prize; they, like the other data miners, had begun to look at relations between movies and viewers in more nuanced ways. While Netflix never actually implemented their final algorithm, the contest produced valuable insights into viewing behavior and algorithm construction. For instance, the competing teams used the data sets to see if subscribers were more generous when rating movies on weekends rather than on weekdays and what effect rating a lot of movies at once had on the process. They were also able to demonstrate that subscribers who liked, say, Woody Allen films, tended only to care for a certain type of his films and did not recommend his other works. Interestingly, they also showed that a small subset of films (that were usually ironic or polemic in nature) were simply beyond reliable predictions. (The most troublesome film proved to be *Napoleon Dynamite*, as subscribers were sharply divided on whether that film was the product of creative geniuses or mass-produced crap; no model generated was ever able to reliably predict why people would rate it the way they did). (Keating 193)

Today, Netflix's recommendation system is even more sophisticated and, according to Kelly Uphoff, Director of Experimentation and Algorithms for Growth and Targeting at Netflix, it is now responsible for generating 75% of all movie and TV choices that users make on the site. In part, the system has grown more sophisticated since movies are no longer just tagged by actors, directors, settings or genres. Netflix now hires independent contractors to watch collectively every movie in its catalog and at least three episodes of every TV series. These reviewers then pick from more than 1,000 tags to describe the texts they've watched, including its genre, setting, time period, sexual suggestiveness, gore, romance level, mood, plot conclusiveness and even the protagonists's moral integrity. Netflix then uses these tags to classify its films into micro-genres that

are sometimes so specific they border on the absurd. In fact, in early 2014, the company had already generated 76,897 possible micro-genres to recommend to viewers, such as Emotional Fight-the-System Documentaries, Period Pieces About Royalty Based on Real Life, and Children and Family Movies Starring the Muppets (Madigral). (To see the micro-genres Netflix has generated, you can log into your account and then type in the following address: https://www.netflix.com/browse/genre/1. The 1 at the end of the URL is the number that corresponds to a particular micro-genre. In this case, the 1 will link to "African-American Crime Documentaries," but changing the number at the end of the URL will change the genre it links to. For example, agid=76102 links to "Gritty Zombie Horror Movies.")

As Alexis Madrigal writes, such a detailed tagging system, when combined with millions of users' viewing habits, "becomes Netflix's competitive advantage." This is because the company's main business goal is to gain and retain subscribers, and recommending precise genres to people on their home screen is "a key part of that strategy." In fact, the company's data shows that member retention positively increases when it places the most tailored or specific rows of genre recommendations higher on the user's home screen instead of lower (Madrigal).



A screenshot of a subscriber's Netflix home screen, showing the types of genre categories Netflix constructs for viewer recommendations.

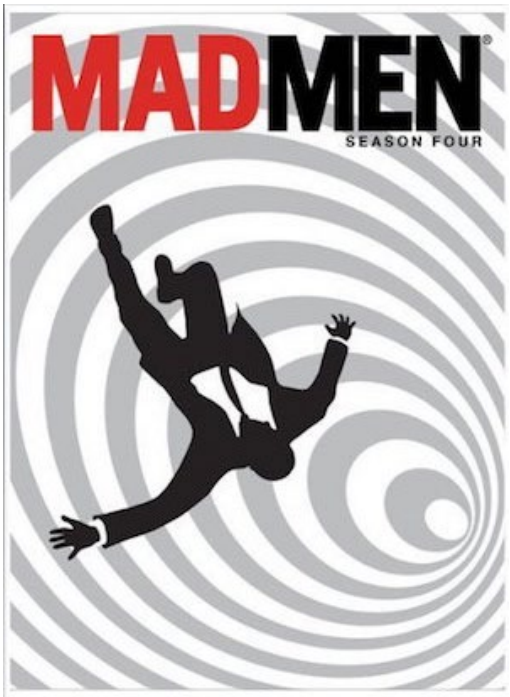
In total, the sophistication of Netflix's Cinematch system, which was driven by the complex analysis of big data sets, helped revolutionize the way people rented movies. The company's ability to help viewers find films they wanted and to deliver them overnight lured millions of subscribers away from the video store where so many others had failed. Indeed, the arrival of Netflix is largely credited with the demise of Blockbuster, the once prolific chain of brick-and-mortar video rental stores. Its costly retail space, poor customer service, late fees and limited selection simply could not compete with Netflix's lower-cost model, broader catalog, and highly sophisticated recommendation system. Blockbuster was also too slow to recognize the threat that Netflix posed. With the early failure of Hollywood Video's e-commerce site, Reel.com, Blockbuster believed that the online video rental business was not a viable threat. "With this reassurance, Blockbuster remained conspicuously slow in its own attempts to develop online strategies" and remained reluctant to invest in a rent-by-mail business model (McDonald). By the time Blockbuster launched its own digital streaming and online rental service in the mid-2000s, a limited marketing budget, long waits for popular DVDs to become available, and a hastily configured distribution system

that slowed delivery times crushed customer retention rates (Keating156). In December 2004, Blockbuster also made the "fatal" mistake of eliminating all of its late fees in order to build customer rapport and to directly compete with Netflix, but in the process the company forfeited approximately $400 million in late fees during a cash-strapped period—a financial hole from which it never recovered (McDonald). In the end, the corporate Goliath simply could not compete with the smaller, nimbler David, and it finally filed for bankruptcy in 2010.



In December 2004, Blockbuster made the "fatal" mistake of eliminating all of its late fees, in order to directly compete with Netflix. The move cost the company approximately $400 million in late fees during a cash strapped period — creating a financial hole from which it never recovered.

Revolutionizing entertainment in the streaming age



Netflix purchased the streaming rights to AMC's dramatic series *Mad Men*, paying nearly $1 million for *each* of the show's 92 episodes.

While Netflix's Cinematch would eventually make reliable recommendations, it also allowed the company to mask some of its weaknesses. If a popular title was low in stock, for example, Cinematch would stop suggesting the title until more copies of the DVD became available. The problem of stocking the right of amount of inventory to meet viewer demand was always a challenge. It became exacerbated when Netflix entered its second and third stages of corporate development, which occurred when it launched a video streaming service in January 2007 and began developing its own original content in 2012. These new endeavors profoundly changed the company's business model by shifting its focus away from that of a logistics company and more towards that of a media channel and studio. As a result, Netflix had to think much more carefully about what its subscribers wanted to watch, which titles it should license for streaming, and which titles it should create.

To better understand the challenge of this shift, consider that during its mail delivery age, Netflix was able to simply purchase physical DVDs, which in essence bought them a license to use those discs in perpetuity. So long as the disc didn't break, the company could send that movie out to as many people over the course of as many years as it liked. Netflix also did not need to strike complicated deals for its DVD purchasing practices because it was allowed to purchase a disc as soon as it was released to the public, no matter who released it.

Streaming licenses work much differently because they operate under the assumption that (in this case) everyone with a Netflix subscription can watch the title, making a single streaming license for a single work dramatically higher in cost than a set of DVDs (Gonzaga). For example, when Netflix agreed to purchase the streaming rights to all seven seasons of AMC's dramatic series *Mad Men*, it paid out nearly $1 million for *each* of the show's 92 episodes (Nordyke and Rose).

Given that one can purchase all seven seasons of *Mad Men* on DVD for roughly $70 dollars, Netflix could have purchased over 1.3 million box sets of the series (or roughly 260 million individual DVDs) for the same price without ever having to worry about those discs disappearing from its catalog once the license expired.

In addition to the higher price tag, studios are also much pickier about whom they will release streaming rights to. Also, they tend to sell groups of products together in exclusive deals as opposed to just singular titles. Thus, users in the United States may notice that Netflix carries most Showtime titles in their streaming library, but carries almost no HBO titles, which are only streamed through Amazon Instant Video or HBO Go, even though Netflix can offer titles like HBO's *Game of Thrones* through its DVD service. The higher costs of streaming licenses and companies' preference to bundle titles in exclusive deals means that Netflix's options are significantly more limited, presenting the company with the challenge of satisfying many different types of viewers with a more narrow catalog since it simply does not have the budget to purchase as widely as it does in the DVD market. To help them navigate these new challenges, the company, of course, still relies on its data scientists, but their job is now perhaps slightly easier.

Using big data for content development

One of the best things about the streaming era from a big data perspective is that users are now doing everything online and every interaction with a site can be logged, tracked and analyzed. In fact, Netflix's data scientists now argue that people don't really need to rate movies anymore in order for it to make accurate recommendations for them. According to Gonzaga, the company can now monitor

> "what shows and movies you watch and how you watch them to figure out which selections were memorable and how to duplicate that experiences with [other] films available in their streaming library."

In other words, the company can now analyze a viewer's behavior to understand that she enjoys watching comedies on Tuesday nights and dramas on Saturday evenings, that she rewatches movies featuring Jodie Foster, suggesting Foster is a favorite actor, and that she stops watching films once high levels of nudity appear. It can then use that data to make reliable recommendations on different days of the week, accordingly.



Netflix recently signed an exclusive four-year, four-movie deal with Adam Sandler and his Happy Madison Productions – a move that is upsetting how films are made and distributed.

Such a nuanced level of understanding of its users also allows Netflix to analyze large-scale viewer preferences and use that knowledge to purchase texts that best match subscriber demands – either through content licensing or commissioning original content. The use of big data sets, Gonzaga notes, "set us up to have more success in product development" since, for instance, the company can see when we "have already licensed all the good WWII documentaries and [when] our users have burned through them." Thus, he stated, when the data scientists see there is a gap in the catalog between what we [Netflix] offer and what our viewers want to watch, we now have the power to actually go and create our own content to fill that gap and feel confident that it will find an audience.

Making a WWII documentary, however, is not as financially risky as many of the deals that Netflix has recently engaged in, some of which have seemed foolish at worst, or radical at best – but all of which are changing how film and television

series are made. Take for example the company's recent decision to sign Adam Sandler and his Happy Madison Productions to an exclusive four-year, four-movie deal. Historically, Sandler has been known for his comedies that employ adolescent and physical humor, with his top grossing films including *The Waterboy (1998), Big Daddy* (1999), *Anger Management (2003),* and *The Longest Yard* (2005). But n the last decade, many of Sandler's films have been considered box office flops, including *Blended* (2014), which grossed just $46 million over its lifetime, *That's My Boy* (2012) with $36 million, and *Men, Women and Children* (2014) with a very paltry $705, 000. Because of the downward trajectory of his box office pull, the decision to choose Sandler as one of Netflix's cornerstones of its content development strategy perplexed many.

Nonetheless, Ted Sarandos, Netflix's Chief Content Officer, believes that the deal is a smart one. Sandler has put out nearly one film each year for the last twenty years, most of which are in Netflix's catalog. As such, the company had a wealth of data showing Sandler's movies are "uniquely" popular on the streaming service across all international markets and that his movies tend to be repeatedly watched by subscribers (Kilday). Box office data also shows that while Sandler's most recent films have tanked domestically, they still have significant global appeal. Sixty percent of *Blended*'s revenue, for instance, came from overseas, and *Pixels* (2015), his most recent release, is likely to perform similarly. Sarandos points out that as Netflix grows internationally, it needs to strike content deals with stars who appeal transculturally. Thus, while conventional wisdom holds that U.S. comedy as a genre does not travel well across cultures, in the specific case of Adam Sandler, that data is wrong ("NATPE 2015"). Sarandos believes that his deal with the star will serve Netflix's service and it emerging markets particularly well. This logic is further augmented by the fact that Netflix will own the rights to each film, meaning the films will remain in its catalog without ever being subject to an increase in price or a license expiration date. Netflix may also sell those movies on DVD or Blue Ray if it ever sees fit.

While it is highly unlikely that Sandler's films will win Netflix critical awards, the company now has over sixty million subscribers, making it clear that it has the muscle to strike exclusive content deals with prolific stars. This practice may shift feature film development away from traditional studios and theaters. Indeed, the Sandler deal was intentionally designed to upset how films are released because, as Sarandos notes, we now live in an on-demand society that can consume content when and where we want, but the one exception has been movie going. He states that viewers simply do not have enough weekends to watch every movie that is released in theaters. But home viewers still have to wait, on average, between 6 to 12 months before they can watch the content they missed at home. This "antiquated" system of windowing, Sarandos states, works against consumers and Netflix. So in order to change when and how movies can be watched, he had to develop a product that he could control start to finish ("Keynote").

Consequently, theaters are scared by the threat Netflix poses. When the company announced its very first movie deal in 2014—a sequel to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*—it also revealed its plans to premiere the film on the Netflix site at the same time it would be released in the IMAX format in theaters across the globe. Regal, AMC, Carmike and Cinemark quickly refused to show the sequel on their IMAX screens, as did Canada's Cineplex and Europe's Cineworld. The IMAX film company seemed content to screen the movie mostly in China, where *Variety* said it would have over 200 locations by the time the movie was released (and where Netflix did not yet offer service), but theatre owners' refusal to play day-and-date releases is telling (Lang). While Sarandos admits that he struck the deal with IMAX to brand Netflix movies as "big" gorgeous films, rather than small, made-for-TV-movies ("NEXT"), theaters sensed that Netflix's ability to strike day-and-



House of Cards was likely the first television show ever developed with the aid of big data algorithms.

date deals set a very dangerous precedent since it cuts theater viewers in potentially significant numbers. In order to deter film producers like the Weinsteins from striking these deals with Netflix, movie theatre owners can only boycott the films in order to protect the theatrical screening status quo. But as the Sandler deal demonstrates, Netflix has already found a way to circumvent even an industry-wide boycott by bypassing the theatre system altogether.

As best exemplified by its original television series, *House of Cards* (2013), Netflix is upsetting the television industry in similar ways. Directed by David Fincher, *House of Cards* is essentially a modern remake of a BBC series, starring Kevin Spacey as Frances Underwood, a rising politician in the cut throat world of Washington D.C. politics. Fincher had pitched the series to HBO, Showtime, AMC and Netflix, with the latter outbidding its competitors by offering to buy two seasons of the show for $100 million dollars without ever seeing a pilot. In essence, *House of Cards* was the first television show "developed with the aid of big data algorithms" (Satell). Those algorithms indicated that a healthy share of Netflix viewers had already streamed Fincher's work from beginning to end, that Kevin Spacey films had always done well on the site, and that many viewers enjoyed the British version of *House of Cards*.

> "With those three circles of interest, Netflix was able to find a Venn diagram intersection that suggested buying the series would be a very good bet on original programming" (Carr).

$100 million dollars, however, is a lot to invest in a project that hasn't even made it to the pilot stage, and Netflix's decision to purchase it sight-unseen marked a significant and radical disruption as to how television series are usually developed. In the traditional model, a network will hear several pitches from producers, put up a limited amount of money to develop some of those pitches into pilots, and then choose which of those pilots to actually put on the air in series form. If the show does poorly, the network can cancel the show mid-season. It is a long-standing model designed to reduce the financial risk of television development. Netflix has bucked his system entirely, largely because of the way it wants to distribute original series.

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Before Netflix began making its own content, it noticed that streaming subscribers tended to watch the television series in their catalog back-to-back-to-back. This insight was then reinforced by a study it published in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2013, which revealed that half the users Netflix studied watched an entire season of a television series (up to 22 episodes) in one week. When it then looked at the viewing patterns of subscribers who were watching ten "currently popular" shows on Netflix and finished a season of at least one of those shows within the space of a month, 25% of viewers in the case of one serialized drama "finished the entire 13-episode season in two days, while it took 48% of them one week to do so." The pace was similar for a 22-episode sitcom, with 16% of viewers finishing the season in two days, while 47% completed it within seven. (Jurgensen).

Netflix interprets this data to mean that the majority of streamers would prefer to have a whole season of a show available to watch at their own pace. The company then revolutionized the television industry by deciding to release its own original series whole seasons at a time, rather than making viewers wait each week for a new episode to become available. Sarandos believes that viewer-controlled, multi-episodic viewing – aka *binge watching* – is most appropriate for the new digital, on-demand generation. However, he admits that in the beginning, no U.S. network partner would have ever worked with the company to co-produce a series released in such a manner. In order to change how television is distributed, then, as in the case of the Sandler deal, Netflix had to buy a domestic program that it could control start to finish (Next). That program was *House of Cards*.[1] [open notes in new window]

Of course, the company's delivery strategy makes Netflix's television development deals profoundly more risky because it means they must purchase an entire season of a show before testing its audience appeal. Controlling this risk is why Sarandos admits that "big data is a very important resource to allow us to see how much to invest in a project," adding that commissioning decisions at the service are "70% science and 30% art" (Martinson). In the case of *House of Cards*, though, the risk seems to have paid off. The show has already been nominated for thirty-three Emmy Awards and has taken home four, including Best Casting, Directing, Cinematography and Sound Mixing for a drama series. Kevin Spacey and his co-star, Robin Wright, also won the Golden Globe Award for best acting in a television series in 2015 and 2014 respectively. The series' critical acclaim also put Netflix on the map for original television programming and helped grow subscribers from 27.1 million to 33.4 million in 2013, the year the series premiered. It is highly unlikely that the Adam Sandler deal will earn Netflix similar kinds of accolades, but clearly both *House of Cards* and the Sandler deal are industry game changers, and Netflix has decided to continue its binge-release strategy for its subsequent programs.

Ratings

For all of its data acquisition, Netflix has surprisingly refused to release one of its most basic metrics to either its content creators or the public: namely, how many people actually stream Netflix shows or movies. And this refusal is changing the way television content and artists' values are determined.



Neither Beau Willimon (*House of Cards*) nor ....



.... Jenji Kohan (*Orange is the New Black*) know how many people have streamed their series on Netflix.

On some levels, Netflix's secrecy makes sense. Because its streaming business offers a subscription-based, ad-free service, it sees little reason to release ratings data to the public. In the United States, viewing numbers are typically collected by the Nielsen Media Company, an independent, third party that tells producers, networks and advertisers how many people watched a particular episode of a program on a given week. The television industry uses this data as a comparative metric to evaluate a program's success, establish advertising rates and negotiate creative talents' contracts when up for renewal.

Because Netflix does not earn money from advertisers and because people can watch episodes whenever they want, traditional ratings data means little to the company and thus it sees few reasons to release viewership numbers to the public. But oddly, the secrecy over how many people have watched its *original* programs extends to the creators of the programs themselves. For example, Beau Willimon, the show runner of *House of Cards* said,

> "To this day, I have no idea how many people have watched [my series] on Netflix. They have never given me any data whatsoever. All they say is, 'Well, we're doing well and we'd like another season.' And that's really all I need to know" (Howard).

Jenji Kohan, the creator of *Orange is the New Black*, echoed Willimon when she stated that she too had never received viewership numbers, noting she's only received "cryptic" statements like, "We're very pleased," which admittedly she found disconcerting at first (Manly).

While Kohan suggests that she now finds the "darkness" somewhat liberating as she doesn't have to anxiously track her show's performance on a weekly basis to see how long it might survive, it's hard to imagine that the darkness is sheer bliss.

Without knowing viewership numbers, creative personnel have no idea how much to ask for financially when a series is up for renewal. And even if that data were released, the talent and their agents would still be "potentially at the mercy of Netflix who [could] argue that the data says you're only worth this much'" without the creative side ever knowing if that internal data is accurate since Netflix is the only party monitoring the numbers (Barr). It is unsurprising then that Netflix's refusal to release its viewing data is forcing Hollywood to adjust to a new way of evaluating a show's worth.

As Willimon suggests, a successful television program is more than just ratings and shares: "there are a lot of different metrics on which to gauge success now" (Howard). Those metrics may include awards nominations, Twitter chatter, merchandising figures and more. In today's market, talent agents and managers have to use a new set of data to enter negotiation territory. "In a typical network renegotiation," said David Fox, who handled renegotiations for *Two and a Half Men*'s Jon Cryer, "you use critical reviews, awards, ratings and ad revenue to support your argument." But with Netflix and other streaming channels, he admits, lawyers are entering unfamiliar territory and the industry needs a new metric: "that's what everyone is looking for right now" (Rose). But when a show lacks buzz or positive reviews, such as the Netflix Original *Marco Polo* or *Hemlock Grove*, both of which were surprisingly renewed for a second season, the refusal to release viewership numbers means that reps for these stars lack almost all specific data points on which to argue (Rose), further complicating the renewal process.

As such, Netflix's refusal to release viewership numbers has prompted new technological developments in the industry. Content creators have now asked third-party monitors, like Nielsen Media Research, to create an opt-in system that independently tracks online platform viewing. According to a high-level Nielsen

employee who spoke to me about this issue on background, companies like Netflix and Amazon Instant Video have removed the watermarks that would traditionally allow a third party to track viewing through their software. Nielsen has now developed a system that circumvents those companies' systems, allowing it to track viewership through audio content. More specifically, when a content creator agrees to share the audio files that accompany their episodes or films, the company inputs those files into a signature audio library. Whenever a "Nielsen family" watches one of that creator's programs through a TV-connected device, its People Meter matches that audio file to deliver information about when a particular episode is being played by a unique viewer and how long that play lasted.

According to the Neilsen representative I spoke with, Netflix has been reluctant to allow for third-party measurement because keeping its creators in the dark about how many people watch a show works in Netflix's favor when it comes time to strike a new content deal. The Nielsen service, which content creators buy, helps balance the power dynamic involved in those talks. But the system is not yet perfect. For one, Nielsen cannot monitor streaming on mobile devices (like iPhones) that are not connected to a TV. Likewise, the company cannot measure platform-specific streaming behavior without a company's cooperation. Therefore, it cannot say how much show X has been streamed on Netflix versus Amazon. However as my source points out, "If the series is exclusive to Netflix, for instance, *Orange is the New Black*, then that's a bit of a no brainer."

Unless Netflix decides to release its ratings data, systems like Nielsen's will only become more important. Netflix has recently announced its intent to invest over three billion dollars annually in content acquisition, meaning that more and more creators will be negotiating and re-negotiating with the service, all of them wanting to know just how much they and their properties are worth. However, Netflix may have even found a way around this by purchasing multiple seasons of a series upfront to avoid the re-negotiation problem altogether. To cite just one example, the company just announced its decision to pour $150 million into *The Queen*, a period drama about the reign of Queen Elizabeth, which is being developed as a six-season deal. Like *House of Cards*, the initial investment in the property is significant and risky. But in the long run, a multiple-season deal may help to reduce the overall cost of the property, which mostly increases in the traditional model when the talent's contracts are up for renegotiation.

Big data and the creative process

The final element I will explore has to do with the way big data may influence and disrupt the creative processes that govern entertainment media. To be sure, Netflix's decision to release whole television seasons at once has encouraged complicated, serial storytelling, which, historically traditional networks have not favored. As Kevin Spacey stated at the 2013 Edinburgh Television Festival, Netflix's distribution model has encouraged a serial, storytelling that takes "a long time to tell" and possesses "sophisticated, multi-layered" story arcs with "complex characters" who "reveal themselves over time" in relationships "that take space to play out" (Plunkett and Deans). Of course, such narrative complexity did not start with Netflix; ABC's *Lost* and AMC's *Breaking Bad* are just two examples of serial narratives that aired before *House of Cards*. But Spacey is right to suggest that Netflix has certainly been one the biggest proponents of serial storytelling because its viewers' downtime in between episodes is dramatically shorter, meaning that artists can create more complicated storylines without having to worry that its consumers will have forgotten what happened in the last episode. And both viewers and critics alike have positively embraced this creative trend.



Because Netflix Originals are ad-free and streamed online, their story lengths can vary significantly from episode to episode. *Bloodline*episodes, for instance, range from forty-nine to sixty-five minutes.

In the case of television, Netflix has also freed its artists from the constraints traditional networks face of interrupting programming at specific intervals for ad-breaks. At the very least, network TV has to fit ads neatly within a one hour or half-hour programming time slot. Because Netflix is ad-free and exclusively streamed, its story lengths can vary significantly from episode to episode. For example, the run times of *Bloodline,* a series developed for Netflix by Sony Pictures Television, range from forty-nine to sixty-five minutes,while the episodes of season one of *Orange is the New Black* range between fifty and sixty minutes, with the finale of season two going for a full ninety-two. The goal of such loose timing, says Sarandos, is to allow his artists to

> "take as much time as [they] need to tell the story well. You couldn't really do that on linear television because you have a grid, commercial breaks and the like" (Jeffries).

While Netflix may create a freer television culture attractive to creators who don't need to fear their show won't proceed past the pilot stage, the company's high levels of financial investment that it pours into its series also begs the question as to how much big data will influence the creation of that programming. How much will computer algorithms begin to dictate what and how artists must create? As Jessica Leber asks,

> "Will screenplays some day be written to meet the whims of data-driven media streaming companies? Will an algorithm direct writers to produce content to appeal to niche audience profiles on Netflix?"

And what about the writing that occurs at the episode level? How will big data affect the direction a show takes? Or as Siraj Datoo asks,

> "If it knows that a large percentage of viewers ended an episode early when a specific character appeared often, might the company suggest the character is removed from the second season?"

There is not enough information publically available to answer each of these questions, but Netflix executives have stated that computer algorithms indeed help dictate which shows the company develops. In fact, Sarandos has repeatedly stated that Netflix mostly uses big data to figure out how large the market might be for a particular project but not to reverse engineer what that project should look like ("Next"). This sentiment is echoed by Cindy Holland, Head of Original Content at Netflix, who states that the company's data allows her to

> "identify subscriber populations that gravitate around genre areas ... [and] allows us to project a threshold audience size to see if it makes for a viable project for us" (Sweney).

Todd Yellin, Vice President of Product Innovation, also notes that the company shares all of its data with its Los Angeles programming team, "to see how it compares to the shows they are thinking about [developing]" and to see if any of those shows might fit the gaps in Netflix's catalog and user demand (Sweney). Indeed, this process likely guided Netflix's decision to create a fourth season of *Arrested Development* after Fox had canceled the show in 2006. Although it's speculation, many Netflix subscribers who started to watch the first three seasons on the service likely had high and rather rapid completion rates for the series, suggesting high viewer demand and engagement with the text. Thus to offer fans more of the series they loved, Netflix likely commissioned an additional season to meet that demand.

Sarandos also indicates that while the company uses big data to decide how much to invest in a particular series, what series to make, and which stars should be included in the show's cast, Netflix does not get involved much in the day-to-day writing process. "One of the things I really believe in is picking really great storytellers who have a history of delivering on great storytelling and letting them tell their stories," adding that Netflix executives only guide their creators "with a very gentle hand" ("Keynote"). When pushed at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival as to what a "gentle hand" or "light touch" means in Hollywood, Sarandos admitted that his team will often serve as a tie breaker if there is a disagreement between creative members about what works best for a show. And they will offer guidance on issues such as how much to move a character up in the story or how quickly to resolve a story element ("NEXT"). Cindy Holland, however, has stated that one of the biggest misconceptions about Netflix is "the perception that my team isn't creatively involved in [an original] series at all." She sums up the relation like this:

> "On the one hand, we have a very light touch … our culture is about freedom and responsibility, and we believe that people do their best work when you give them both. But on the other hand, I'd like to acknowledge the amazing hard work my team does. So, that's always a bittersweet comment that we hear."

The issue is further complicated by a story Ted Sarandos recently told at an industry conference. In it, he explains that in the very first minute of *House of Cards*, Kevin Spacey's character does two important things: he kills a dog and he talks directly to the camera while he does it. Early watchers of the episode reacted negatively to this scene, as evidenced by the fact that several stopped viewing the



Ted Sarandos, head of content acquisition at Netflix, states that while Netflix uses big data to help determine product development, the company does not use the data to reverse engineer what projects should look like.

program in the first few minutes. One of two things were happening, he noted: either viewers were turned off by the unusual use of second-person; or viewers were not expecting something so startling in the first minute and thus may have decided to stop and then return to the show, when, for example, their kids were no longer in the room. "My job was to figure out which one it was, and then to ignore them both." Any regular television network, he stated, would have cut that first scene based on the viewing data Netflix received, but he argues, Netflix kept the scene as it was to maintain the artist's freedom and integrity ("Keynote").

The fact that Sarandos admits that his job is to figure out why people tuned out of *House of Cards* suggests that this data is important and will indeed affect which direction the show takes in the future. If, for instance, it turns out that viewers were turned off by the use of second person, it would stand to reason that the second and third seasons would employ less of the device (as they actually did.) For now, however, there is not enough information that is publically available to determine how much the algorithms are influencing the writing of a series, especially in subsequent seasons, or the ways in which algorithms will prove to be vastly different in comparison to other, more traditional types of audience focus groups.

Finally, critics have wondered what the big data approach will mean for the diversity of television shows.

> "If businesses perfect the job of giving us exactly what we want, when and how will be exposed to things that are new and different, the movies and TV shows we would never imagine we might like unless given the chance? Can the auteur survive in an age when computer algorithms are the ultimate focus group?" (Leonard).



Netflix's shows seem to be increasing, rather than decreasing, the diversity of television series, as evidenced by *Orange is the New Black* and *Narcos*, among others.

As more and more media companies develop online delivery platforms, the collection and reliance on big data will only increase, and these questions will only grow more prominent. Yet, as Sarandos argues, and it's a comment I agree with, the use of data algorithms has so far generated content that has added to rather than detracted from the diversity of the television landscape. For instance, *Orange is the New Black* is a prison-based dramedy with a predominantly female cast and is one of the most ethnically and physically diverse shows on television. Likewise, *Narcos* is set in Colombia, is directed by the Brazilian José Padilha and stars another Brazilian, Wagner Moura, in the lead role. As Netflix develops more stories to succeed in the global market, as well as in specific territories such as Latin America, viewers will have greater exposure to internationalized texts through their Netflix subscriptions.

Conclusion

According to Neil Hunt, Chief Product Officer at Netflix, his company spends roughly $150 million and employs roughly 300 people just to improve its video recommendation system each year, but the investment in the utilization of big data is what drives so much of the company's success (Roetggers). Its use of big data to increase its shipping speeds, make personalized video recommendations and effectively stock its catalog helped the company succeed in the online movie rental business, ultimately playing a pivotal role in the demise of its major competitors. As the company moved into the digital streaming age, Netflix's data scientists have continued to leverage that data in order to make smarter content acquisition and distribution choices, but in the process, the company has also disrupted several aspects of the film and television industry. More specifically, its

business models have caused a shift in how media texts are valued, how contracts are negotiated, how texts are purchased, and how those texts are consumed and distributed in ways that by-pass or challenge the status quo.

As PM Napoli writes, the challenge for media scholars now is to further explore how media content production and its acquisition is increasingly reliant on sophisticated algorithms. The challenge will be for media scholars to examine not only what sorts of algorithms are being produced and how they are affecting the decision making processes of media companies, but also to understand "the assumptions, priorities, and inputs that underlie their construction."

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Notes

Acknowledgement: Thank you to Matthew Hargus for his feedback on the initial draft of this piece.

1. Netflix had released a 2012 television series, called *Lilyhammer*, on its site before *House of Cards*. *Lilyhammer*, however, was also released on Norwegian broadcast television and was not heavily influenced by the service in terms of its creative direction. [return to page 2]

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Box office failure: *Honky Tonk Freeway* and the risks of embarrassing the United States

By Julia Prewitt Brown



The new freeway is named after US President Andrew Jackson, whose presidency was known to have expanded the patronage system in American politics.



The freeway bridge demolished by Ticlaw citzens after the governor reneges on his bargain.



Welcome to Ticlaw!

> "I wouldn't be too sure ever about what commercial is."
> —John Schlesinger

We have become so accustomed to hearing politicians and television commentators end statements with the phrase "God bless America" that we tend to forget that its use in popular discourse is a fairly recent development. Ronald Reagan was the first to utter it in a Presidential nomination speech and in 1984 he became the first President to close a State of the Union address with these words. Democrats adopted the phrase in 1992 when nominee Bill Clinton used it in his address before the Democratic Convention and thereafter, for most of his State of the Union addresses (Scher). Thus in the 1980s U.S. political rhetoric sounded a new note of calculated piety that is still with us. The religious right helped to elect Reagan, who won by carrying 44 states with 489 electoral votes and who went on to ally himself with religious fundamentalists like Jerry Falwell throughout his presidency. It was Falwell who, some years later, launched the humorless attack on *Teletubbies,* the popular TV show aimed at pre-school children, on the grounds that the purple character Tinky Winky was intended as a gay role model.

John Schlesinger's raucous farce, *Honky Tonk Freeway*, released seven months after President Reagan took office in January of 1981 was inimical to the spirit of these times. When the final print was screened for executives at Universal Studios, the film's editor Jim Clark describes a scene in which the executives watched in stony silence, then stood up and "began screaming at [Schlesinger] ....saying things like 'This is anti-American, anti-religious. How could you have made such a thing?'" (Mann 479). The film went on to garner indignant reviews like that of Janet Maslin, who, despite the fact that the film had amused her, announced in *The New York Times* that "John Schlesinger...thinks America is a crass, foolish, disagreeable place," (Maslin). It's true that the United States of *Honky Tonk Freeway* is, among other things, crass, foolish, and disagreeable, but no more so than the United States featured in other comedies of the period, like *Animal House* (1978), *Airplane!* (1980), *Caddyshack* (1980),and *Porky's* (1981), all of which received more favorable reviews, and none of which offer *Honky Tonk Freeway's* arch critique of the United States.[1] [open notes in new window]

Schlesinger was born in London in 1926 into a well-off assimilated Jewish family, cultivated in music and the arts. He began his long and varied professional career in the late fifties making television documentaries for the BBC. His first feature film, *A Kind of Loving* (1962), was part of the British new wave, a movement rooted in the "kitchen sink" drama of the fifties. But Schlesinger distanced himself from the ideological aims of his more politically radical contemporaries, like



Tourists arriving at last.



Ticlaw's mayor heading the parade on Main Street after citizens have raised the cash for the bribe.



With the bribe accepted, the deal is made over a model of the new freeway.

Lindsay Anderson, early on. In interviews he made it clear that while he wasn't interested in advancing a particular set of political beliefs, he was nonetheless determined "to shake [society] up…and to deal with topics that were not the-run-of-the-mill" (Buruma 45). He gives the example of *Sunday Bloody Sunday* (1971), a film set in London of the 70s about a Jewish homosexual doctor's relations with a young man who is also involved with a woman. Another example would be *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), originally given an "X" rating for its nudity, explicit homosexuality, and obscene language, a classification that was changed to "R" after the film won the Academy Award for Best Film of 1969. Even Andy Warhol admitted to feeling jealous of Schlesinger's achievement in the film. Up through 1967, Warhol remarked,

> "the underground was one of the only places people could hear about forbidden subjects and see realistic scenes of modern life…[*Midnight Cowboy*] took away a real drawing card from the underground" (Floyd 113).

In spite of the positive critical reception of *Midnight Cowboy*, the view of the United States in that film was hard for some viewers to swallow, and the suspicion that the British-born, Oxford-educated director, who also staged operas and plays, might be looking down his nose at us is suggested in some of the reviews of the film. The same suspicion lurks in some of reviews of Schlesinger's less successful film of 1975, *The Day of the Locust,* an adaptation of Nathaniel West's acclaimed satire of Hollywood in the 1930s. About Schlesinger's view of Hollywood in *The Day of the Locust*, the director Sidney Lumet was reported to have asked, "How can Schlesinger shit where he eats?" (Mann 416). Since Schlesinger was making big money in Hollywood, how dare he criticize it? Going from *Midnight Cowboy*'s evocation of abject poverty, social fragmentation, and decadence in New York to *The Day of the Locust*'s portrait of apocalyptic violence inherent in the Hollywood dream factory, Schlesinger unwittingly prepared the way for a cool reception of *Honky Tonk Freeway*. But after the national mood shifted from the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate zeitgeist to the Reagan 80s by way of the Iran Hostage Crisis, which was widely seen as evidence of U.S. weakness, the film probably did not stand a chance, at least not with the executives at Universal.[2]

Set in the fictitious town of Ticlaw, Florida, the film's plot traces how a high-spirited town manages to survive the construction of a new freeway that deprives it of the tourist traffic it thinks it needs to prosper. Through a combination of bribery, hard work, a Disneyesque imagination of its own commercial potential, and, as a last resort, a willingness to dynamite the freeway so as to detour traffic into the town, Ticlaw triumphs. Schlesinger's signature theme of human survival and the necessity of compromise, which is found in almost every major film he made, blends here with the pursuit of the American dream "of success at whatever cost," as the director put it (Keating). A wide array of characters from California, Utah, Kentucky, and New York descend on the Ticlaw Inn for an evening of Bacchanalian celebration and dance. On the following day, all the visitors depart *en masse* only to be involved in a massive car wreck that everyone survives. At the time *Honky Tonk Freeway* was made, Schlesinger had been filming for over twenty years and his mastery of the medium is evident. The car wreck, which seems to rise from the choreography of the dance that precedes it, is a *tour de force* of elegant pandemonium reminiscent of Jacques Tati.

Honky Tonk Freeway was a legendary box office disaster. Universal had to release the film but declined to promote it. According to Schlesinger's biographer, William Mann, it earned only $600,000 of its negative cost of $24 million and did permanent damage to Schlesinger's reputation in Hollywood.[3] "John's career… was never the same again," writes Mann, insisting that in Hollywood the film was viewed not only as "a terrible betrayal of the industry" but an attack on the United



Two incompetent bank robbers (George Dzundra and Joe Grifasi) toss their ill-gotten gains into what turns out to be a garbage truck, so they have to rummage through piles of refuse to find their cash.



Ad exec Hume Cronyn inspects a restaurant menu while his car is robbed.



Carmen's pink Edsel arriving at the drive-in mortuary.

States itself (Mann 481).

Though not as weirdly invidious as Falwell's suspecting *Teletubbies* of seeking to undermine the nation's moral fabric, this accusation is like it in being willfully off the mark. *Honky Tonk Freeway* is not an attack but a *jeu*, a wild ride, a mock celebration of a ruthless U.S. entrepreneurial spirit, resourcefulness, and ability to survive even its own suicidal excesses. Outright religious hypocrisy, political corruption, and sexual libertinism are all thrown into the mix, yet the musical score and mood of the film are irritatingly triumphant. So cheerful a parody of U.S. triumphalism was probably bound to fall flat with popular audiences in 1981. In campaign speeches Reagan had celebrated the importance of a strong national defense and, during his first term, he escalated the Cold War and ordered a massive buildup of U.S. Armed Forces. U.S. superiority was not to be taken lightly, especially after the failed rescue of hostages in Iran and the daily jeering of their captors.

When one wonders why the film has not enjoyed the reappraisal usually accorded to unpopular works by distinguished directors, we have only to recall that strident patriotism intensified after 9/11. In the aftermath of the bombings of the World Trade Center in 2001, even left-wing intellectuals were calling for a halt to irony. (I attended a talk during this period in which Sven Birkerts, writer, public intellectual, and later editor of *Agni Review*, urged critics to move away from "irony" in public discourse toward a new appreciation of "sincerity.") Schlesinger often complained that Americans have no sense of irony—an unfair generalization, certainly, when we think of the tradition of screwball comedy, of novelists from Mark Twain, Melville, and James up to Jonathan Franzen, and of U.S. standup comedy—but he had reason to note its deficiency in much public discourse during the period in which he was making films in the United States. *Honky Tonk Freeway* may be read as an ironic retort to the shift from seeming powerlessness to jingoistic patriotism signaled by the election of Reagan over Carter.[4]

Another reason for the absence of a reappraisal of *Honky Tonk Freeway* is that it is considered relatively weak by respected admirers of Schlesinger's work, such as William Mann and the writer Ian Buruma, Schlesinger's nephew. The film has a small cult following but is generally viewed as far less of an achievement in comedy than his late adaptation of the Stella Gibbons' novel, *Cold Comfort Farm*. Whereas the satiric edge of *Honky Tonk Freeway* is occasionally blunted by a *Dumb and Dumber* kind of humor (especially in scenes with the two bank robbers, despite the fine acting), the humor of *Cold Comfort Farm* is more subtle and consistent in tone. Schlesinger himself did not make strong claims for *Honky Tonk Freeway*, but he was often honestly critical of his own films, as may be seen in Buruma's published conversations with him. Schlesinger did not hesitate to point out flaws that even his more severe critics had missed. Thus, an anecdote given at the end of Mann's biography is intriguing. After seeing *Honky Tonk Freeway* on television nearly two decades after he made the film, the director said, "'I stand by every frame'" (555).

Future generations may look differently on this film. Even if it continues to be judged a lesser accomplishment than his more celebrated works, it may come to be seen as one of the more telling lampoons of its historical moment. Not only



Stained glass window at the drive-in mortuary where mother's ashes can be charged.



"What is your married name?" "Christ." (Geraldine Page and Deborah Rush.)



Feeding the circus animals fast food hamburgers.

might later audiences be more receptive to a satire that is not directed at their own but an earlier generation. U.S. triumphalism has become an established target of TV satire since the film was made, as the popularity of "The Colbert Report" proved, and the success of the Coen Brothers dour comedies, which include a heavy dose of satire of U.S. institutions, shows that audiences are willing to entertain a more ironic view of the United States than they were in 1981.[5] The contrast between the Coen Brothers' brutal humor and Schlesinger's more refined raucousness may have to do with Schlesinger's roots in earlier comedy. The quirky humor of *Honky Tonk Freeway* is dispersed over an extended narrative that alternates between chaos and repose, reminding us of Tati's films. Schlesinger viewed Tati's *Traffic* before he began filming and he echoes its patterns of destruction and recovery. In another link to a great comic filmmaker with a genius for working a film's rhythm up to epiphanies of hysteria, *Honky Tonk Freeway* recalls the films of Preston Sturgess. Schlesinger's screenwriter Edward Clinton began his career as an actor and had worked with one of Sturgess' prized actors, Eddie Bracken. "What I learned from him had a great influence on my playwrighting," he said in discussing *Honky Tonk* Freeway (Interview). Lack of balance,distortion, and incongruity—the trademark of Bracken's style—are felt in scenes throughout Schlesinger's film.

"I rather like excess," said Schlesinger in an interview with Roger Ebert in 1975. The histrionic tendency of films like *The Day of the Locust* (1975) can seem unpalatable, but such exaggerations are usually there for a reason. (An example might be the bloody, erotically tinged cockfight in *The Day of the Locust*.) A technically gifted director, Schlesinger sometime uses technique to excess, but excess is also tied to his strengths. Born and bred in England, Schlesinger at least avoided that "catastrophic form of Englishness" that, in Adam Gopnick's view, sometimes afflicts the English artist:

> "a dread of pretension raised to an aesthetic principle....a false sense of decorum [that was] in Auden's view, the real English vice" (Gopnick, 74-9).

Whatever weaknesses the operatic *Honky Tonk Freeway* may possess, a false sense of decorum is not one of them.

Take the costumes, for example, ingeniously designed by Ann Roth. Even those who like the casual extremes of U.S. dress will wince at the pure kitsch of the outfits that the citizens of Ticlaw and the characters who converge there wear: shimmering reptilian leisure suits, bewildering belts and jewelry, flowered shirts matched with plaid pants, women's purses the size of luggage, and so on. In *Honky Tonk Freeway* Americans are nothing if not self-assured. Hume Cronyn plays a retired advertising executive who is proud to have "invented bad breath."

Schlesinger's talent for highlighting the more brazen details of life in the United States may be owing to his English perspective. Not so much the "supercilious European disdain" that Buruma lightly complains of in his introduction to *Conversation with Schlesinger*—although this factor cannot be wholly denied—as that peculiarly English appreciation, evident throughout the history of English comedy, for the embarrassing gesture, personality, or situation. For example, Carmen Shelby, played by Beverly D'Angelo, drives her pink Edsel into a drive-through mortuary in Paducah, Kentucky, where she will pick up the urn of her



Ticlaw competing with Disneyworld.



The mayor trying to persuade the town sheriff (Renny Roker) to dress as an African native for the tourists.

mother's ashes, which rises up from the depths on a small elevator platform. At that point, we know we are approaching the comic terrain of Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One,* the British satire of the LA funeral business adapted to film by Tony Richardson in 1965, and we are prepared to laugh anew. And we do laugh or begin to laugh, but then we are caught in a curious bind because Carmen is clearly suffering over the death of her mother. Directing D'Angelo throughout the film not to mug or deliver punch lines but to play the comedy straight, Schlesinger guides the viewer to be both amused and touched by her situation. In the aftermath of her loss, she wistfully remarks, "The International House of Pancakes has been the one consistent thing in my life," and we believe her. [6]

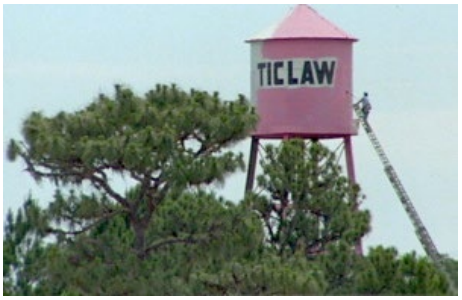
The characters' general lack of embarrassment drives the plot action from opening scenes in which William Devane, playing the town mayor who also serves as the town preacher, bribes a government official before our eyes. Brazen behavior rises to a pinnacle later at a freeway restaurant where all the tourists converge before descending on Ticlaw. Thus Jessica Tandy, who plays a joyful, canny alcoholic, insists to her husband Sherm that by ordering five Old Fashioneds at once during lunch she is proving she is *not* an alcoholic because she never drinks in secret. Here we are given a snapshot of self-deception at its most vainglorious. A drugged out drifter joins Carmen and her new lover at a table and casually opening the funereal urn begins snorting the ashes as if they were cocaine. ("That's my mother!" she protests. "You're shittin' me," he replies.) When a waitress carrying a plate of seafood calls out, "Who gets the crabs?" a group of gay men shout, "We all do, sooner or later!"

The United States of *Honky Tonk Freeway* is a place where anything goes as long as it *does* frighten the horses. Any action that vaunts itself, seeks satisfaction, makes a splash, or can be advertised for sale is acceptable and even admirable. We're asked to believe that it makes perfect sense for the residents of a small town on the verge of bankruptcy to try to compete with nearby Disneyworld. All they have to do is train an elephant to water ski. Those who drive to Ticlaw from afar are equally bold. Why not rob a bank if you want to take a vacation to Florida? Or if you're tired of a religious vocation, consider prostitution. Urging the reluctant black sheriff to dress as an African native with a bone in his nose for the arriving tourists, the town mayor exclaims, "Do it for private enterprise!"

With its wide array of characters converging by car in a final scene, the structure of *Honky Tonk Freeway* resembles the epic comedy *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad Mad World*, directed by Stanley Kramer in 1963. But whereas the earlier film, with its panoply of brilliant comedic performances, centers on greed, *Honky Tonk Freeway* is more of a sly Aristophanic carnival of pleasure and human folly. For all its vulgarity, Ticlaw, now painted salmon pink to attract tourists, its stucco surfaces awash with light and rain, appears radiant as the tourists enter one by one by car. Opening its arms to everyone, the town becomes a parody of U.S. democracy.



Painting the church steeple pink for the tourists.



Advertising the town to draw in traffic from the freeway.



"Get in the Pink. Come to Ticlaw!"



The nuns hitchhiking after their car breaks down.

For what Ticlaw finally has to offer are pleasures that evaporate as quickly as the rain on its sun-drenched pavement: food, sex, dance. As Schlesinger said in an interview,

> "[W]hen all do meet in Ticlaw, Florida, all focus departs from them, and their stories are left as a mass of loose and blunted ends."

The young nun breaks with her superior, the dentist cheats on his wife, and the children run from the circus animals in fear. Earlier in the film, the camera's "flowing from one car to the next while they speed along the highway unites all the characters in a way far more compelling than the plot ever manages to," said Schlesinger (Study). Held together by their dreams of the future, the characters race on until disaster strikes at the end. As the theme song sardonically promises: "Keep your worries all behind you / There's a better life ahead."



Help on a roadside on a rainy night (Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn).

In making *Honky Tonk Freeway*, Schlesinger turned away from his usual emphasis on complex characters and situations, an emphasis that made full use of his talent for working with actors. (Alan Bates, Glenda Jackson, Dustin Hoffman and many others have credited Schlesinger with developing their art.) Whereas earlier films are known for going beneath the surface—for example, in showing Joe Buck's inner misery in *Midnight Cowboy* or the emotional complexity of the unconventional love triangle in *Sunday Bloody Sunday*—this film allows its characters to scramble on the surface like so many bad skaters on a sheet of ice. In the end, the community of Ticlaw survives and Schlesinger's favored theme of human survival lightly infuses the subplots. The most moving of these plotlines is that of Sherm and Carol, the elderly couple played by Tandy and Cronyn. When their car breaks down late at night on the freeway in the pouring rain, the hatless Sherm heads out in search of help. "I'll go with you," says Carol, "We're in this together." It's a momentary tribute to the endurance of married love, something Schlesinger witnessed in his own parents. Quiet and understated, it shows how conscious Schlesinger is of the power of contrast.

All the other relationships between men and women in the film, in marriage and otherwise, are loudly exploitative. The foul-mouthed children of one such couple,



An RV conveying a dysfunctional family in Monument Valley.

travelling in a vast, over-equipped RV, ignore the sites rushing by that their mother, played by Teri Garr, primly orders them to observe. The only appealing children in the film occupy a bus marked “Asian-American Orphans,” human consequences of the Vietnam War. They add a touch of whimsy to the film that is charmingly evoked through a masterful tracking shot that follows their animated faces as they narrate, in increasingly wild and exaggerated form, an absurd story about a carnivorous horse.



The Orphan Hostage Crisis. The mayor explains to the governor that he is holding the Vietnamese orphans hostage until he agrees to build the freeway exit.



The governor finally gives in. The actors next to him ressemble John Erlichman and John Dean, both White House counsels who served under President Nixon and who went to prison for their involvement in Watergate.

Community is not to be found in the bourgeois family, the government, or in any church, but in Aristophanic revelry and U.S. dreams of “a better life ahead.” Does the car wreck make the characters come to their senses? Can anything be salvaged? In her hotel room Carmen sweeps up the spilt ashes from the urn after her lover has traipsed through them, leaving white tracks on the carpet like Chaplin in the snowstorm.



Carmen prepares for an evening of pleasure, but the cord of her hairdryer is about to yank her mother’s ashes off the dresser.



Carmen’s new lover leaves footprints of her mother’s ashes in the hotel room.

What did audiences feel walking out of the theater? Every character survives the wreck but is last glimpsed trapped in a punishing physical position ironically suited to his or her personality, like so many sinners strewn across a comic Dantesque landscape. (The orphan bus remains intact.) The story, Schlesinger said,

> "is about bribery and corruption and going after a dream. The dream of success at whatever cost. This can be taken literally or not. But we pushed it as far as I believe we can go" (Keating).

No doubt it was pushed too far for many viewers, but it's not often that a film makes U.S. audiences both laugh and wince at its country's "dream of success at whatever cost." Schlesinger's own politics were inconsistent—in England, he prided himself on having voted for all three parties in the course of his life—but he remained an astute social critic of both the United States and England in his films. According to Buruma, Schlesinger was "both inspired and appalled by America" and he regarded England "with great affection and almost constant irritation"(xx). His dual allegiance enabled a salutary critical distance.

A panorama of U.S. life that includes a dentist, pimp, nun, ad executive, prostitute, bank robber, animal trainer, housewife, politician, drug addict, preacher, nymphomaniac, and children's writer is not to everyone's taste, anymore than *Bartholomew Fair*, Ben Jonson's grand spectacle of London life of the early seventeenth century, with its pickpockets, bullies, gallants, and justices, is to everyone's taste. The gags in John Landis' *Animal House* are funnier to many viewers, as proven by the popularity of that film since its release, but *Honky Tonk Freeway* is not a film of gags. As Schlesinger explained,



Laughing, drinking, and singing, the drivers of a truck carrying a wild rhinoceros speed toward the final multi-vehicle car crash at the end of the film. The driver is a songwriting cowboy played by Paul Jabara, who wrote the song he and his drunken girlfriend sing: "Faster! Faster! Everybody's goin' faster, faster!"

> "If we had really wanted to make a totally surefire commercial, "we would have hired six gag writers and I wouldn't have directed it. It would have been a series of gags, which is what the public seems to be oriented to....I wanted to do an affectionate comedy that had a dark side, and yet had moments when you could be absolutely serious" (Study).

U.S. audiences may have missed the affection not only because of the national mood, as I have suggested, but because Schlesinger's lead actors were not as well known or beloved as the actors in, say, *Caddyshack* (Bill Murray, Chevy Chase) or *Animal House* (John Belushi).[7] But Schlesinger achieved his moments of seriousness. The screeching wreckage of cars that concludes *Honky Tonk Freeway* is one such moment, bringing to mind an observation on the opening page of a novel published the same year the film was released, John Updike's *Rabbit Is Rich*. As customers crowd into Rabbit Angstrom's Toyota dealership to take advantage of the Japanese manufacturer's better mileage, Rabbit observes that "the people out there are getting frantic, they know the great American ride is ending" (3).

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

I am grateful to the editors of *JUMP CUT* and to Rudy Eiland for their help in developing this article.

1. *Animal House, Caddyshack, and Porky's* are all "lovable loser" stories and *Airplane!* is a classic gag comedy. The structure of *Honky Tonk Freeway* is determined neither by the gag nor the exploits of any misfit group. As will be shown, it has a more comprehensive and riskier aim, especially for a British-born director. Another comedy of the period with which Schlesinger's film bears a superficial resemblance is *Kentucky Fried* Movie (1977). [return to text]

Whereas the latter is made up of a series of largely disconnected sketches, *Honky Tonk Freeway* weaves together through seamless camera movement the stories of its characters until the climactic scene when they converge. The artists and technicians who worked with Schlesinger often emphasize his "complete unity of purpose" in bringing together all the elements of a film, as cinematographer Billy Williams put it (Schaefer274). John Bailey, who directed the cinematography for *Honky Tonk Freeway* stresses Schlesinger's masterful sense of coordination:

> "*Honky Tonk Freeway* was restrained chaos in the sense that it could have been a mishmash of unrelated incidents. But Schlesinger had a strong sense of how it should all weave together and how the sequences should dance....It's so easy, in films of that scope, to be visually all over the place. But *Honky Tonk Freeway* is a very disciplined film..." (Schaefer 71-72).

2. Another film that made far less profit than anticipated in this period was Steven Spielberg's *1941* (1979), a comedy about a panic in LA after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The film gained popularity later when an expanded version aired on ABC.

3. For background on the film industry in the early eighties see the discussion of Universal Pictures in Prince's "The Industry at the Dawn of the Decade" (*A New Pot of Gold* 11-12).

4. In his Introduction to *American Cinema of the 1980s,* Stephen Prince points out that while the *myths* about U.S. films of this period include the conviction that "Hollywood film mirrored the politics of the Reagan period," this proposition is only "partially true" (*American* 1). Prince does not discuss *Honky Tonk Freeway* but he gives Schlesinger's *The Falcon and the Snowman* (1985) as an example of a film that did not endorse "the claims of Washington's cold warriors" (*American* 12), as films such as *Rambo: First Blood II* (1985) and *Rambo III* (1988) obviously had. It's possible that the spirit of *Honky Tonk Freeway* may have arisen in part out of what Frank P. Tomasulo refers to as the "bifurcated American zeitgeist" of the seventies. (In "Movies and Cultural Contradiction" Tomasulo cites Frederic Jameson's ideas on "the nation's split-sensibility to itself and to the rest of the world" [Tomasulo 160]). In addition to reflecting the American zeitgeist, however, Schlesinger experienced another kind of bifurcation in being British.

Also, like many British artists, he uses irony as a method of comprehending opposing ideas and feelings about national character and allegiance. See my essay on Schlesinger's grasp of problems of national identity in this period, "An Eye for an I: Identity and Nation in the Films of John Schlesinger."

5. The popularity of the HBO series *Little Britain USA* (2008), which provides an ironic take on U.S. mores, is further evidence of the development of taste in the United States for irony directed at U.S. society.

6. In casting D'Angelo as the lustful Carmen, Schlesinger made use of the echo provided by her recent performance in *Hair* (1979). Directed by Milos Forman, *Hair* was adapted from a Broadway musical about a Vietnam War draftee who is later killed in the war. D'Angelo plays his debutante-turned-hippie lover and the film ends with an anti-war protest outside the White House. In both films, D'Angelo plays a mourner.

7. One reason for the success of the revival of Spielberg's *1941,* referred to in note #2,may have been owing to the widespread familiarity of its comic actors—for example, John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Hollywood superhero as brand manager: an allegory of intellectual property

by Ezra Claverie



In *Iron Man* (Marvel Studios, 2008), genius inventor Tony Stark can make better technology in a cave, held prisoner by Afghan warlords, than his rival can make using Stark's own factories in the USA.



Obadiah Stane, villain of *Iron Man* (Marvel Studios, 2008), harangues an engineer for the R&D department's failure to duplicate Stark's miniature fusion reactor.

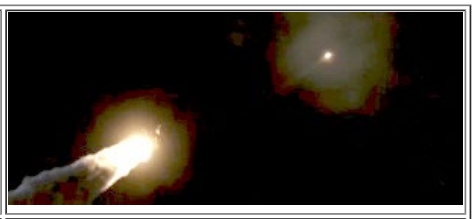


The hero of the Marvel Studios Iron Man films, Tony Stark, has no super-powers in the strict sense, just inherited wealth and genius as an inventor. In *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), Obadiah Stane, an unscrupulous executive within Stark Industries, envies Stark's genius. Stane reverse-engineers a knock-off of Stark's prototype Iron Man armor, but without Stark's miniature fusion reactor, he cannot power it. Stane bullies the company's research and development engineers, but even they cannot duplicate the tiny reactor. Stane finally resorts to murder, stealing the reactor that Stark uses to keep his damaged heart beating. As Stark lies paralyzed and dying, Stane exults:

> "Do you really think that just because you have an idea, it belongs to you? Your father, he helped give us the atomic bomb. Now what kind of world would it be today if he was as selfish as you? [Stane holds up the reactor, admiring it.] Oh, it's beautiful. Tony, this is your Ninth Symphony. Ah, what a masterpiece—look at that. This is your legacy."



"Do you really think that just because you have an idea, it belongs to you?" gloats villain Stane in *Iron Man* (Marvel Studios, 2008).



In *Iron Man* (Marvel Studios, 2008), the villain's knock-off armor belches smoke despite running on (stolen) fusion, a detail that suggests technological inferiority, social irresponsibility, and moral evil.

Stane's name suggests the *stain* of moral contamination, and so does his version of the Iron Man armor: despite running on fusion, it belches dark smoke. Stane's behavior in the film suggests that the first-rate invent while the wicked and second-rate copy or steal. Despite his comparison to the symphony, Stane does not plan to put the reactor in the public domain, where we can find Beethoven's compositions; instead, he plans to sell the armor to Stark Industries' arms clients. Furthermore, Stane's pro-social rhetoric about the bomb undercuts his argument about sharing technology: after all, even hawkish viewers see nuclear weapons as the limit case of the dissemination to technical knowledge. The Bush Administration premised their case for invading of Iraq on the need to control the proliferation of weapons that the USA had the power to make for generations.

Tony Stark arrives by private jet at Bagram Air Force Base to sell arms in the US- and NATO-occupied Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in *Iron Man* (Marvel Studios, 2008).

In the films of the linked "Marvel Cinematic Universe," Stark makes his armor and reactor using earthly materials, and he does not keep his identity secret, so many rivals attempt to copy his work. However, even superhero films less concerned with industrial design and espionage show a preoccupation with intellectual property absent from their comic book sources. Supervillains in DC and Marvel comics hatch a variety of schemes, but in their Hollywood iterations, one occurs more than any other: the illicit copying of the hero's powers or super-technology.

My analysis seeks to explicate the cultural and pedagogical work that these films do regarding intellectual property relations. These relations have made the exploitation of superheroes created in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1960s profitable for media conglomerates well into in the 21st century. Superhero blockbusters tell us little about the experience of rank and file workers in the comics or movie industries, but they tell us much about how studio and conglomerate executives want us to view intellectual property relations. As Janet Wasko writes of Hollywood films, they "may offer engaging fantasies and convenient escape from the drudgeries of daily life, but they also offer explicit visions of the world and lessons for living in that world."[1] [open endnotes in new window]

This essay therefore proposes a reading of these corporate "lessons for living": the superhero blockbuster as an allegory of the management of intellectual property. It looks at DC and Marvel superhero films against two apparently unconnected historical phenomena: the so-called DVD boom of the 2000s and the concurrent U.S. project of restructuring of Iraq to create an environment friendly to multinational corporations. Along the way I offer readings of films from Marvel's Iron Man franchise (later integrated into the larger Avengers franchise) and DC's Superman franchise (recently integrated into a larger Justice League franchise). Finally, I propose an oppositional heuristic for reading the Hollywood superhero primarily as the anthropomorphic sign of a brand—a mask worn by shareholder capital—and only secondarily as a character.

Superheroes and political economy

This essay continues the kinds of analysis that earlier political economies of mass media have performed, while also attending closely to the narratives of the films themselves. My analysis has ambitions, however modest, at the level of political praxis: to change the way that students, scholars, and even casual audiences understand not just superhero movies but also their own affective relations to narrative brands. Media corporations seek to create brand loyalty, harnessing fans as unremunerated labor; both film artists and corporate marketers interpellate us as virtuous and clever while trying to yoke us to media brands generations old. I seek to demystify the discursive operations of one group of such brands. Following Janet Wasko, my attention "to ownership and control" becomes a means to explicate the relations between "a class system and structural inequalities" and escapist film narratives.[2]

Since Umberto Eco's 1972 essay "The Myth of Superman," critiques from the left have pointed out that U.S. superheroes work to preserve the status quo and its arrangements of power and wealth. Recent critiques have elaborated.[3] Many commentators have noted that Hollywood superhero movies also serve to advertise brands, but scholars have not yet adequately discussed the films' tendency to build their narratives around the policing of intellectual property. Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy drew comments on its dramatization of branding, with Dan Hassler-Forest remarking on Bruce Wayne's creation of "his own brand of crime-fighting."[4] Will Brooker calls Batman "a 'range brand,' not just in our world but in his own":

> "The 'W' logo that adorns Wayne Tower in Nolan's films is echoed as the Bat-symbol across Batman's costume, gadgets, vehicle, environment, and associates."[5]

Also in regard to Batman, Martin Fradley argues,

> "Wayne/Batman's neurotic branding of his crime-fighting persona—his unmistakable logo and militarized 'toys'—all too clearly mirrors the U.S. film industry's selfsame practices."[6]

However, these critics do not examine the broader pattern of intellectual property melodrama that recurs across films based on characters owned by Time Warner subsidiary DC Comics and by Disney subsidiary Marvel comics. This essay does.

Villains in the comics sometimes copy the superhero's powers, but conglomerate Hollywood obsesses over this crime. Chuck Tryon argues that the financial success of DVDs in the 2000s pushed studios to think of films as gateways to other commodities and "to reconceptualize film narrative in ways that tie together the fictional world of a film with the economic goals of a studio."[7] Fixation on the piracy of intellectual property within superhero film narratives brings the fictional worlds and moral horizons of the superhero closest to the real-world goals of media corporations.

I propose that we can most usefully read this fixation as an incursion into the story world of the strategic preoccupations of conglomerate Hollywood's executives and upper-level creative workers, who make their fortunes by curating intellectual property on behalf of shareholders. Superhero blockbusters make normative claims about challenges to intellectual property relations; the films resemble anxiety dreams of corporate secrets disastrously exposed. The mass audience never wakes from nightmares of intellectual property theft, but they don't approve blockbuster scripts. My analysis lays bare the fears of people who do.

In her widely cited 1991 essay, "'Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!': the Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext," Eileen Meehan uses *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989) to study brand management across multiple platforms, "orchestrated by the conglomerate in its search for more profitable and cost-efficient ways to manufacture culture."[8] Only in her conclusion does she use the term "commodity fetishism" to put a name to our failure to perceive the branded character as a "complex structure of interpenetrating cultural industries and the corporate interests of media conglomerates," a structure that remains "generally invisible to us."[9] Meehan puts this invisibility last, but I seek to put it first, as the gap in the scholarly reception of these films. Meehan's essay has a claim to being the first to study superhero movies in Marxian terms, but it performs a three-quarters analysis, leaving to us that last step: explicating these films' dramatization of the same intellectual property logic that drives their production.

This essay's focus on narrative in the context of industrial history entails a methodological choice to pay less attention to the differences within and between media corporations. Scholars like Jerome Christensen and Derek Johnson have helped us understand how workers within conglomerates make and defend claims of company or individual agency, but here such an approach can risk reifying the notion of the exceptional individual who transcends his or her structural setting. Many forms of mass culture, especially the superhero film, valorize the individual while actually strengthening the collective and class-based relationship we call the corporation. Havens, Lotz, and Tinic have called for "critical media industry studies" of the "quotidian practices and competing goals [...] not subject to direct and regular oversight by corporate owners" that "define the experiences of those

who work within the industry."[10] Yet in a secretive and risk-averse industry like Hollywood, studying everyday practices of those who control a major brand presents extraordinary barriers to outsiders. The study of "competing goals" also seems to invite the false equivalency of treating worker, shareholder, and executive interests as having equal sway within the industry or having equal claims to our sympathy.

Furthermore, media corporations can and sometimes do adapt oppositional discourses in ways that increase shareholder equity, even when that opposition challenges intra-industry hierarchies or subverts the narrative or marketing norms of genres. We see this in films like *Deadpool* (Tim Miller, 2016). Star Ryan Reynolds produced the modestly budgeted film, adapting the anarchic and fourth-wall-breaking Marvel antihero against industry norms. In both in its promotion and also during its running time, *Deadpool* constantly breaks the "rules" of superhero blockbuster filmmaking and marketing. It ridicules the larger X-Men franchise, to which it belongs; it seeks an R rating, thumbing its nose at the still-growing theatrical market in Mainland China; and it mocks prominent brands (like Ikea) that other blockbusters would go out of their way to promote in positive terms. Yet *Deadpool* broke box-office records, showing that Hollywood can identify seemingly uncooperative texts that will actually boost shareholder value.

Modes of superhero production

DC and Marvel Comics now occupy analogous positions within the armatures of two conglomerates, Time Warner and Disney. Fredric Jameson's allegorical method of studying the novel offers a useful interpretative model when approaching art produced by such corporations. He argues, "what we formerly regarded as individual texts are grasped as 'utterances' in an essentially collective or class discourse."[11] In movie production, this "collective" origin becomes literal: unlike novels, Hollywood blockbusters emerge from the coordinated labor of thousands of workers.

Yet as discourse, these films "speak" on behalf of executives and brand managers who green-light projects and approve final cuts, not on behalf of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees or the Directors Guild of America. Blockbusters do not speak on behalf the non-unionized workers in animation studios around Asia to which Hollywood studios outsource CGI work. And they certainly do not speak on behalf of artists in the non-unionized, work-for-hire comics industry. In Marx's terms, a superhero franchise consists not merely of new textual commodities, but also of the "machinery" of production: characters and stories alienated from their creators via work-for-hire agreements. Here, fixed capital inheres not just in soundstages and cameras, or in a bullpen for comics artists, but in a "library" of copyrighted characters and narratives.



Deadpool (20th Century Fox, 2016) breaks the fourth wall, mocks commercial brands (including its own), and engages in over-the-top violence that ensured it a ban from Mainland China.

Jameson treats allegory as a category hermeneutic rather than ontological. That is, he uses allegory as mode of reading texts, one that seeks patterns of meaning about the social context from which those texts emerged, but not necessarily intended by their authors. Where medieval Christian writers deliberately structured texts around allegorical codes, nineteenth-century liberal novelists like Josef Conrad did not consciously do so. Therefore, Jameson seeks to infer the unacknowledged codes that shape texts in ostensibly "free" and "creative" art forms produced under capitalism.

Following Jameson's example, I take individual authorial intention as, at best, secondary to the commercial objectives of a work collectively and industrially produced in the manner of a franchise blockbuster. Some scholars offering

The logo of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, AKA the IATSE Bug. ("IATSE Logo," *Wikimedia Commons*, n. d., https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/9/99/IATSE_Logo.png.)

allegorical readings of Hollywood film assume intentionality; Christensen proposes a reading of *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989) as an "allegory contrived to accomplish corporate objectives" within the newly merged Time Warner conglomerate.[12] However where Christensen reads the film as a deliberately allegorical, intra-conglomerate utterance from Warner Brothers executives to *Time* executives, I pursue instead signs of the shared class interests that all such executives represent, notwithstanding their tactical or corporate-cultural differences. After all, canny investors disdain comic-store loyalties to DC or Marvel and instead buy stock in both the Walt Disney Company *and* Time Warner.

The superhero emerged as a generic model in 1938, and by 1940 the genre had coalesced into public conventions, easily and legally copied by competitors, as well as proprietary content, protected under copyright law. Marketing literature distinguishes between brand and commodity, but Scott Lash and Celia Lury develop this distinction in terms informed by Marxian analyses of value:

> "you cannot go to a market and buy a brand. Brands do not typically exchange at all. They are only for sale on capital markets [...] The commodity is produced. The brand is a source of production. The commodity is a single, discrete, fixed product. The brand instantiates itself in a range of products, is generated across a range of products."[13]

Lash and Lury suggest, but stop short of, explicitly framing the brand as I will here: as a non-material element of the means of production.



As Otto prices generic foods in *Repo Man* (Universal Pictures, 1984), his co-worker grates on his nerves by singing a 7 Up soft-drink advertising jingle. Anyone can make and sell lemon-lime soda pop, but only the Dr Pepper Snapple Group (in the USA) and PepsiCo (outside the USA) can sell 7 Up.

Under the current system of intellectual property laws, nobody has a monopoly on the conventions of superhero stories; anyone can make a generic or off-brand superhero movie. Hollywood has produced superhero films not adapted from comics—*Darkman* (Sam Raimi, 1990), *The Meteor Man* (Robert Townsend, 1993), *Unbreakable* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2000), *Sky High* (Mike Mitchell, 2005), *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* (Ivan Reitman, 2006), *Hancock* (Peter Berg, 2008)—but studios do not wrangle over the rights to off-brand characters created for the screen, as they do over characters with strong brand equity.

Marvel survived in the 1990s by spinning off titles from their bestselling characters, the X-Men.[14] In 1993, Marvel sold to Fox the film rights to the X-Men and associated characters, including Deadpool, as well as the term of art *mutant*.[15] Although X-Men titles dominated Marvel's production schedule during the 1990s, after the success of Fox's *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000) and *X-Men 2* (Bryan Singer, 2003), Marvel began reducing its output of *X*-titles. In 2001, *X-Men* titles still topped the comic sales charts eleven out of twelve months, but by 2005 Marvel's reduced production and promotion led to no *X-Men* titles charting.[16] In 2014 Marvel writer Chris Claremont confirmed rumors that had circulated among fans: "the *X*-department is forbidden to create new characters. [....] Because all new characters become the film property of Fox."[17] In 2015, when a fan asked Marvel's Senior Vice President of Publishing Tom Brevoort why the company had done no tie-ins for *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Bryan Singer, 2014), Brevoort evaded with another question:



> "If you had two things, and on one you earned 100% of the revenues from the efforts that you put into making it, and the other you earned a much smaller percentage for the same amount of time and effort, you'd be more likely to concentrate more heavily on the first, wouldn't

you?"[18]

In *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (20th Century Fox, 2014), a teenage mutant American Quicksilver appears without his sister, the Scarlet Witch. However, in one brief and wordless scene, we see him watching TV at home with a little girl seated on his lap, her red-brown hair suggesting the Scarlet Witch, whom the script does not name.



Avengers: Age of Ultron (Marvel Studios, 2015) prominently features a grown-up, non-mutant Scarlet Witch, the product of experiments by the totalitarian mad-scientist organization Hydra.



Avengers: Age of Ultron (Marvel Studios, 2015) features a grown-up, non-mutant Quicksilver but gives him less screen time than his sister. His heroic death in the last reel suggests that Marvel Studios chose not to cultivate the sibling that 20th Century Fox gave such a prominent role in *X-Men: Days of Future Past* the summer before.

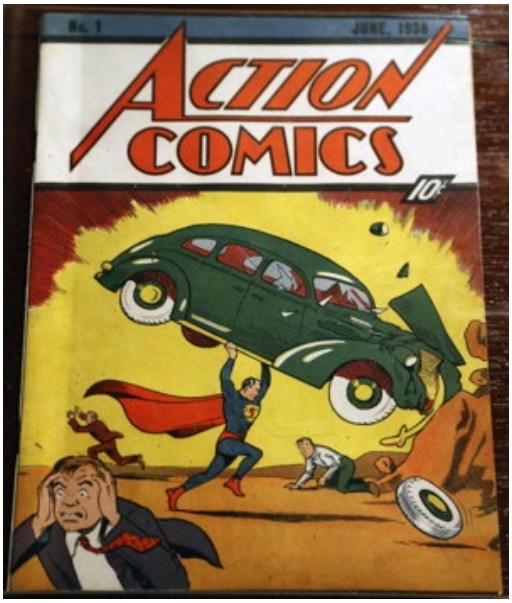
Moreover, a few characters, such as the siblings Quicksilver and the Scarlet Witch, lie in a zone claimed by both companies. The studios negotiated a deal wherein Marvel can use the pair provided Marvel does not identify the siblings as mutants, a term "exclusive to the X-Men": "They're also not allowed to have any connection to their famous father, Magneto."[19] *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015) moved the siblings' origin to a European country invented for the film, where their parents died long ago.

Although some fans blame 21st-century Hollywood for treating comics as a mere testing ground for material to license into other media, the DC-Marvel duopoly has used superheroes this way since before World War II. As Gerard Jones has shown, Superman' creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, hoped that their creation would prove popular enough to license: drafts of Superman stories from 1935 show Siegel trying out marketing slogans and Shuster sketching "boxes for cereal and whole wheat crackers with Superman's likeness."[20] The duo had created Superman by cobbling together elements from other characters. From Edgar Rice Burroughs's John Carter of Mars, they borrowed the notion of a man granted virtual super-powers by visiting a planet with lower gravity than that of his birth. From Emma Orczy's *Scarlet Pimpernel* and Johnston McCulley's Zorro stories, they borrowed the vigilante with a dual identity. In the nexus of invention, copying, and variation that we call "creative" work, Siegel and Shuster feared that others would try to profit from their new character, that Superman would escape the networks of property relations that guaranteed them a share, however small, of the revenue that he generated for National Allied Publications (later renamed DC). In *Action Comics* no. 6, November 1938, the duo had Superman expose a crooked marketing agent who licensed the hero's image to sell breakfast cereal, gasoline, and automobiles without his consent.[21]

In 1947 Siegel and Shuster sued National, seeking ownership of Superman and five million dollars in compensation for licensing revenues that they believed National had unfairly withheld.[22] Siegel and Shuster lost, and National fired them. The court did rule that National had unfairly exploited some of Siegel and Shuster's ideas for the *Superboy* title, and required National to pay a settlement of $100,000 to the plaintiffs, "one fiftieth of what they'd asked."[23] National retained ownership of Superman.

In 1968, conglomerate Kinney National Services purchased Superman's publisher, DC Comics, as well as Warner Brothers; then in 1971, Kinney renamed itself Warner Communications Incorporated.[24] Since the 1970s, executives at DC have worked less to sell comic books than to develop and curate intellectual property. Beginning in 1976, president Jenette Kahn reconfigured DC from a publisher of comic books to what she called a "creative rights company" that generated content not only for other divisions of WCI but also for outside licensees.[25] By 1985, DC took in "about a third of its approximately $70 million in revenues from comics, with the other two-thirds [...] split between licensing and other products."[26]

In contrast to DC's four stable decades as a subsidiary of a media conglomerate, Marvel took a more tortuous path. In 1968 publisher Martin Goodman sold Marvel to the Perfect Film and Chemical Corporation, which later changed its name to Cadence Industries; from there, Marvel passed through other hands, including Roger Corman's New World Pictures.[27] In 1989, "junk-bond king" Ron Perelman bought Marvel for his McAndrews & Forbes Group.[28] Perelman said that he wanted Marvel to become a "mini-Disney in terms of intellectual property."[29 The Walt Disney Company provided both the model and apotheosis of intellectual property management, as Disney's strategy of corporate "synergy"



Superman's first appearance in *Action Comics* #1, June 1938, has made this comic book more valuable to collectors than any other. (Joe Shuster, *Action Comics* #1, "Action Comics No. 1 – The First Appearance of Superman," *Flickr*, April 30, 2013, https://www.flickr.com/photos/jcapaldi/8705811176.)

had made them synonymous with characters autonomous from the animated shorts in which most of those characters originated.

Mike Budd has argued that this synergy makes "every Disney product [...] both a commodity and an ad for every other Disney commodity" and enables every new text to strengthen "the Disney brand."[30] Marvel imitated that strategy and added a rhetoric of custodianship to legitimate their practices to fans. In 2008, Marvel Studios chair David Maisel said,

> "We are in the Iron Man business [...] so whether it be a major motion picture or a video game, we have somewhat of an obligation to our fans and the consumer to stay involved with the creative process."[31]

After IMS Capital Value Fund bought a stake in Marvel in 2002, a manager at IMS remarked,

> "Marvel needs to be sold to a larger entertainment company, like Disney or AOL Time Warner, with the leverage to make better films and promote the library of characters."[32]

Disney's 2009 purchase of Marvel and their 2012 purchase of Lucasfilm cemented their lead over competitor Time Warner as the world's biggest generator of licensing fees from media properties. In 2005, *License!* magazine ranked Disney first, with $15B in licensing revenue, and Warner Bros. Consumer Products second, with $6B. That same year, Marvel surged from sixty-ninth place (and a mere $189M) to fourth place (and $4B).[33] After Disney's acquisitions of Marvel and Lucasfilm, they still rank first, but now with $45.2B in licensing.[34] Warners holds on in sixth, still bringing in just $6B.[35] If we needed a reminder of the power of conglomerate Hollywood to retread old content, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (J. J. Abrams, 2015) broke box office records, but Disney expects to make more from licensing than from ticket sales.[36] As *Vox* notes,

> "*Star Wars* merch is expected to bring in $5 billion in sales over the coming 12 months, rising to as much as $20 billion in the next five years."[37]

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Even the cover image of Wonder Man cops elements from Superman's debut: his position in the lower left and the composition's strong line moving toward the partly-crushed vehicle in the upper right. (Will Eisner, *Wonder Comics* #1, "Wonder Man (Fox Publications)," *Wikimedia Commons*, n. d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wonder_Man_(Fox_Publications)#/media/File:Wonder_Comics_Cover_1.jpg.



DVD buyers could not skip *Piracy: It's a Crime* (Intellectual Property Office of Singapore, 2004), the ubiquitous and infamous trailer.

Since the development of the blockbuster model in the 1970s, the major studios have shifted their focus away from stand-alone hits and toward franchises, what Thomas Schatz calls "calculated megafilms designed to sustain a product line of similar films and an ever-expanding array of related entertainment products."[38] [open notes in new window] U.S. superhero comics, no longer a mass medium crowding newsstands, now provide content for those franchises.

But as Clare Parody argues, we can most usefully think of the "content" that studios adapt not as narrative or even necessarily character, but as "brand identity, the intellectual property [...] and presentational devices that cohere, authorize, and market the range of media products that together comprise the franchise experience."[39] In their big-screen adaptations of these brands, studios turn the policing of intellectual property into a heroic melodrama, a "presentational device" at the center of the "franchise experience."

But why, readers may ask, do superhero blockbuster fixate so on copying? Why don't other Hollywood genres worry over intellectual property within their narratives?

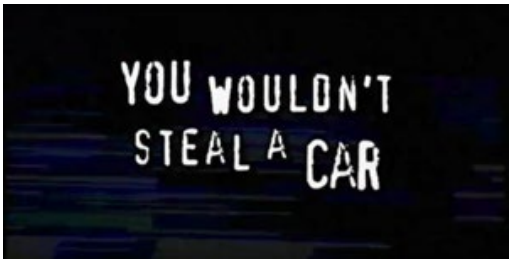
From the birth of the comic-book superhero, publishers copied the pattern of successful characters and attacked competitors who copied their own characters, and this work still preoccupies the managers of these brands. Superman first appeared in the June 1938 *Action Comics* no.1, the sales of which exceeded everyone's expectations for the still-new medium of monthly comic books filled with original stories (i.e. not just reprints of newspaper strips). It sent publishers scrambling to duplicate its success. Unlike a hit Hollywood movie, a hit comic book required little capital and planning; a few dozen pages of four-color newsprint cost little compared to a knock-off *Gone with the Wind*.

National Allied Publications, which published both *Action Comics* and *Detective Comics*, wanted to duplicate the success of Superman. So *Detective Comics* artist and editor Vin Sullivan asked Bob Kane to invent another superhero.[40] Kane and his (usually uncredited) collaborator Bill Finger whipped up the Bat-Man, who, like Superman, wore a circus-acrobat costume, had a dual identity, fought antisocial crime, and had special powers (here, martial-arts prowess and the genius to invent gadgets).

But such imitation also crossed lines of company ownership. Jones writes about the lore of this "gold rush."

> "One story passed among creators for years, now presented as fact in nearly every history of comics, concerned a *Detective Comics* bookkeeper named Victor Fox who saw the sales figures for the first issue of *Action Comics*, closed his ledger, said he was going to lunch, rented an office in the same building, and that same afternoon announced that he was a comic book publisher. The story isn't true. Fox never worked for Detective Comics [....] How he heard about the comic book bonanza is unknown, but in late 1938 he appeared to the Eisner and Iger studio and said, 'I want another Superman.'"

Will Eisner and Jerry Iger ran an independent comics shop, a shop not in the retail sense but the factory sense: a suite of writers and artists who supplied stories on demand to publishers who needed to fill pages. Eisner and Iger's shop



Maybe you wouldn't steal a car, but the makers of *Piracy: It's a Crime* (Intellectual Property Office of Singapore, 2004) stole the music that they used as a score.



The IPOS equates the illicit copying of video files with the snatching of purses from sidewalk cafes in *Piracy: It's a Crime* (Intellectual Property Office of Singapore, 2004).



Piracy: It's a Crime (Intellectual Property Office of Singapore, 2004) equates the downloading of torrented videos with the burglary of private residences.



"You wouldn't steal a movie," says *Piracy: It's a*

delivered Wonder Man, "a blond, red-costumed superhero with powers duplicating those of Superman" who "had his first and last appearance in *Wonder Comics* no.1 (May 1939)."[42] National immediately sued Victor Fox for infringing their copyright on Superman.

In his 29 April 1940 opinion in the case of *Detective Comics, Inc., v. Bruns Publications, Inc., et al.*, Judge Learned Hand notes three ways that Wonderman copies Superman. *Wonderman* styles its star "champion of the oppressed," as *Action Comics* styled Superman; Wonderman possesses preternatural strength and immunity to firearms; and Wonderman "at times conceals his strength beneath ordinary clothing" only to reveal "a skintight acrobatic costume" beneath. [43] Hand's opinion also cites two precedents, *Sheldon v. Metro-Goldwyn Pictures Corporation* and *Nichols v. Universal Pictures Corp.*[44] Hand's citation of Hollywood precedents tells us something important about the relation between intellectual property and industrial practice: since at least 1940 comics publishers and Hollywood studios have influenced one another, exchanging not just content to remediate but also legal precedents, a body of intellectual property law that regulated the two industries long before conglomeration brought them together. The ground on which 21st-century studios build new superhero narratives consists of sedimented layers of innovation, duplication, and managerial anxiety about intellectual property.

The pedagogical blockbuster

Superhero movies became major studio business during a period of explosive growth in home video sales between 2002 and 2007, a period that *Billboard*, *Retailing Today*, *Variety*, *Video Business*, and the *Wall Street Journal* called the DVD boom. During the boom, DVD retail became the "the largest source of consumer spending on filmed entertainment across all distribution channels."[45] By 2007, theatrical exhibition supplied only 21.4% of Hollywood's revenues, while home video supplied 48.7%. [46] In order to protect their revenues, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) pursued a campaign to reduce the unauthorized copying of video. One public aspect of that campaign resulted from the partnership between the MPAA and the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore (IPOS).

The IPOS launched a public-relations initiative called "Honour IP," shortened to "HIP."[47] From this partnership resulted a trailer, "Piracy: It's a Crime," which then screened in Singapore before *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang Yimou, 2004). A techno score pounds over a montage of thefts shot with speed-ramping and breakneck zooms, as intertitles in a distressed font hail the viewer:

> "You wouldn't steal a car. You wouldn't steal a handbag. You wouldn't steal a television. You wouldn't steal a movie. [Here, a shoplifter steals a DVD.] Downloading pirated films is stealing."

The MPAA then made this trailer available for U.S. DVD manufacturers, who put it on discs before movies. Manufacturers added a feature that angered buyers: viewers could not skip this propaganda film. "Someone really wants you to watch this," wrote Finlo Rohrer, covering the backlash among DVD buyers.[49] Parodies of the trailer became an online meme, subverting the IPOS's goal of making their anti-copying position hip.

In a bit of unintended farce, the makers of "Piracy: It's a Crime" had used music by Dutch artist Melchior Rietveldt, but they had told Holland's music royalty collection agency, Buma/Stemra, that the trailer would run only "at a local film festival." Rietveldt later discovered his own music playing in the trailer on a

Crime (Intellectual Property Office of Singapore, 2004), conflating artwork (feature film) with media platform (video disc). Here, a sticky-fingered hand makes its move toward a retail DVD.



Here, a shoplifter pilfers a DVD in *Piracy: It's a Crime* (Intellectual Property Office of Singapore, 2004). Downloaders supposedly don't buy DVDs, and therefore they threatened studio profits during the platform's boom years.



In *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (Cannon Films, 1987), Lex Luthor lights a cigar from his solar-powered knock-off of Superman, who will soon begin terrorizing New York.



Gary Shandling plays the humorless senator who would expropriate Stark's armor for "the American people" in *Iron Man II* (Marvel Studios, 2010). *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Marvel Studios, 2014) reveals the Senator as an agent of perennial villains Hydra.

Harry Potter DVD.[50] Worse, when Rietveldt complained to Buma/Stemra, one of the agency's officers offered to help him sue for royalties on the illegal condition that Rietveldt give the officer a third of any settlement that Rietveldt obtained.[51] According to court documents from Rietveldt's ensuing lawsuit (which he won), the trailer ran on "at least 71" different DVD titles.[52]

"Piracy: It's a Crime" falsely conflates copying with various kinds of stealing. Unlike a thief who steals one of my belongings, an unlawful copier does not deprive me of my use of the thing copied. Copying only deprives me of a possible future "use" if I have a limited monopoly on the reproduction of the thing in question. Crucially, such a monopoly does not depend on my having made the thing. Singapore's Senior Minister for State and former law professor Ho Peng Kee said of the "Honour IP" campaign,

> "Whether it is a fancy gadget, a household brand or music and movies, someone invested time and effort to create it and owns the intellectual property in it. We need to realise that it takes numerous parties working endless 18-hour days to bring to us a unique piece of movie magic."[53]

Ho pays lip service to the labor that goes into media production while obscuring the legal relations that exclude most workers from a share in the profits their work generates.

Below-the-line workers directly benefit from intellectual property laws only if they have organized to bargain for a share of residual profits, and then only according to the terms that they negotiate. Hollywood labor unions have collective bargaining agreements that require studios to pay residuals from movie profits to unions not in individual compensation, via payroll, but in payments to the Motion Picture Industry Pension and Health Plans.[54] The Screen Actors Guild secured these agreements in 1960 (ironically, under Ronald Reagan's leadership).[55] Changes in the locations of production and in the profitability of distribution platforms mean that such agreements come under re-negotiation, as seen in the 2007 strike by the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television, and Radio Artists (ACTRA) over the terms of compensation for digital media residuals with U.S. studios.[56] Workers not represented by unions receive no share in the profits from the intellectual property they create, whether they work in Los Angeles, Vancouver, or at the new Oriental Movie Metropolis in Qingdao. Some might argue that media franchises dependent on existing intellectual property constitute long-term projects that require future labor to keep running, and that therefore intellectual property laws indirectly benefit workers hired by those franchises, but this amounts to saying that those who work for a living benefit from having the chance to be exploited by those who merely own.

Unlike many workers in the U.S. film industry, including cartoon animators, comic book artists failed to organize into unions.[57] The freelance and work-for-hire contracts under which the great majority of comics artists have worked shut them out of participation in the profits from their work. When the Copyright Act of 1976 took effect, it solidified the legal basis for artists to claim sole copyright to their work, but as Paul Lopes notes, "a loophole in the act exempted 'work-for-hire' artists from these rights," such that "DC and Marvel immediately made up new contracts and release forms that designated artists as work-for-hire artists."[58] These contracts shield publishers and studios from sharing profits with labor.

Supplementing the pedagogical project of implicitly pro-shareholder texts like "Piracy: It's a Crime" we find the narratives of superhero blockbusters that position copycats as villains. In *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (Sidney J. Furie, 1987), Lex Luthor cloned Superman against his will, but we would not see



Sam Rockwell plays the always overdressed Justin Hammer, doofus industrialist, who copies Tony Stark's armor in *Iron Man 2* (Marvel Studios, 2010).



Lt. Colonel James Rhodes testifies about Stark's armor to the Senate Armed Services Committee in *Iron Man 2* (Marvel Studios, 2010).



As Rhodes testifies, Stark hacks the Senate computer system in *Iron Man 2* (Marvel Studios, 2010).



"Welcome, Mr. Stark," says the Senate's hacked computer system in *Iron Man 2* (Marvel Studios, 2010).

the trope return to the screen until the DVD era, when piracy and torrenting became such worries for studios. In a parody of Copyleft or Creative Commons activism, these films present illicit copiers as fools at best, genocidal sociopaths at worst.

"A fair, efficient, and predictable environment"

Marvel's Iron Man films contain a paradox: Tony Stark invents technology that should radically change human civilization, but each film begins in our familiar world, not changed by flying armor or clean energy. This becomes most apparent in *Iron Man II* (Jon Favreau, 2010). Early in the film, Tony Stark testifies to the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee about the Iron Man armor in a set-piece that shows director Favreau and his actors in top comedic form while also making the case for private control of the armor. A senator named Stern declares, "My priority is to get the Iron Man weapon turned over to the people of the United States of America." Yet Favreau's casting of Gary Shandling as the senator telegraphs to viewers that we should not take this *stern* and pompous man seriously. Favreau's casting of Sam Rockwell as the smarmy, incompetent defense contractor Justin Hammer, CEO of Hammer Industries, helps render Hammer as the farcical, Louis-Napoléon inverse of Tony Stark.

Stark's sidekick, Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes, played with confidence and grace by Don Cheadle, testifies regarding attempts by Iran and North Korea to develop their own versions of the Iron Man armor. He presents satellite photos of the test sites. Stark interrupts Rhodes's testimony, using his super-smartphone to hack the room's computer system; Stark then shows the committee footage taken on the ground by the foreign governments. The North Korean armor malfunctions, spraying bullets among onlookers, and the Iranian suit explodes. Finally, in a video bearing the Hammer Industries logo, Justin Hammer appears beside another malfunctioning suit. "I'd like to point out that that test pilot survived," says Hammer.

By hacking the monitors to show these failures, Stark demonstrates technological mastery, not just compared to competitors but also compared to the U.S. government, whose intelligence he bests and whose equipment he hacks. "You want my property? You can't have it!" he says. "I have successfully privatized world peace." Stark, already a billionaire, need not sell his technology, even to the state.

While this sounds like a neoliberal dream, *Iron Man II*'s narrative presents the "private" element of privatization as a fragile ideal requiring defense. The film pits Stark against an alliance between copycat Hammer and Russian genius Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke). Vanko develops not only a suit of powered armor but also a fleet of drone suits for Hammer Industries. In the film's climax, Stark confronts something like a capitalist's nightmare: the proprietor finds his own intellectual property turned against him, the alienator now the victim of alienation. Stark defeats the drones and Vanko, such that the film gives Capital a happy ending, but Labor doesn't get one. Even in the interior shots of Justin Hammer's factories, workers rarely appear, and when they do, they appear far in the background, out of focus.

Iron Man II frames Stark's rivals and the state as neither ethical enough to trust with the armor nor competent to duplicate it. Only Vanko, motivated by a personal (and therefore non-commercial) grudge, has the necessary ability, but his defeat in the film's climax ends his competition with Stark. *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) and *Iron Man III* (Shane Black, 2013) therefore take place in a world without ubiquitous flying armor or miniature fusion reactors. Stark



North Korea copies Stark's armor with disastrous results in *Iron Man II* (Marvel Studios, 2010).



Stark's video shows an Iranian suit of powered armor explode during takeoff in *Iron Man 2* (Marvel Studios, 2010). Stark manipulates the AV equipment wirelessly, but rival industrialist Justin Hammer must fumble with old-fashioned hardware as he attempts to thwart the impromptu presentation. In this moment of physical comedy, he sends a remote control flying, even as the Hammer Industries armor crashes to the earth.



On the screen (within the C-SPAN meta-screen), Tony Stark plays a secret video of Hammer Industries' attempt to copy Stark's own design. The suit malfunctions, breaking the pilot's bones with a crunch; in the video, Hammer exclaims in voice-off, "Oh shit!" Meanwhile, in the foreground, Hammer resorts to pulling the plugs of the AV system, too late to hide his failure from the C-SPAN audience or the audience of *Iron Man 2* (Marvel Studios, 2010).

thus protects the world by protecting his intra-diegetic monopoly on what Marvel Studios would call "the Iron Man business." Within the diegesis, the hero creates intellectual property, while outside the diegesis, corporations sell and license the hero *as* intellectual property.

Of all superhero films, the Iron Man franchise shows the most sustained interest in recent U.S. military interventions overseas. The first film in the series re-writes the hero's place of origin from Vietnam to Afghanistan, into the context of Stark Industries' sale of weapons to U.S. clients in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; the third film pits the hero against a terrorist organization seemingly based in Muslim countries, which exploits veterans of recent U.S. occupations. Neither this superhero movie franchise nor any other sends its hero to Iraq, the most bloody and least popular U.S. intervention since Vietnam. Studio executives showed instrumental rationality in avoiding even the appearance of taking a side that might provoke opposition from potential viewers.

Yet if the U.S. occupation of Iraq constitutes a subtext of Iron Man's adventures, then U.S. attempts to rebuild Iraq along lines favorable to multinational corporations therefore constitute a subtext of the 21st-century superhero film genre's obsession with intellectual property. As superheroes battled would-be copycats on the screen and MPAA trailers equated copying with theft, the Coalition Provisional Authority, installed in Iraq by U.S. military force, proclaimed a set of legal and economic reforms known as the 100 Orders. Order 80 aimed to secure intellectual property, because "companies, lenders and entrepreneurs require a fair, efficient, and predictable environment for protection of their intellectual property."[59] The language suggests neutrality, but the Orders set the stage for the privatization of Iraqi industry and resources by foreign corporations

Like Justice Kennedy's 2010 opinion in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, Order 80 says nothing about structural imbalances of power or wealth. For Kennedy, corporations merely represent "associations of citizens," and laws that restrict corporate spending (here equated with speech) unfairly discriminate against a category of those associations.[60] Like the Intellectual Property Office of Singapore, the Coalition Provisional Authority uses language that obscures the economic relations that it actually promotes. Order 80 instead frames the need to protect intellectual property in populist terms, "as necessary to improve the economic condition of the people of Iraq."[61] In May of 2003, Paul Bremer announced, "Iraq is open for business again."[62] As many critics of the occupation pointed out, Bremer meant a particular kind of business: that of multinational corporations.

Wendy Brown notes that Iraqi farmers had long obtained seed "from a national seed bank [...] in Abu Ghraib, where the entire bank vanished after the bombings and occupation."[63] Into this void stepped foreign agribusiness, who could now, under Order 81, apply for "plant variety protection" for genetically modified seeds.[64] Nancy Scola says that Bremer's announcement amounted to "telling Monsanto that the same conditions had been created in Iraq that had led to the company's stunning successes in India." [65] Scola reminds us that hundreds of Indian farmers bankrupted by their dependence on Monsanto seeds committed suicide by drinking the company's Round-Up herbicide. She also notes that genetically modified seeds contaminate the larger gene pools of related crops, such that "eventually much of the world's seeds could labor under patents controlled by one agribusiness or another."[66]



Justin Hammer congratulates himself in *Iron Man II* (Marvel Studios, 2010), not realizing that genius villain Ivan Vanko has used him as a stooge.



Only Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke) has the brilliance to equal Stark's designs in *Iron Man 2* (Marvel Studios, 2010), such that Stark and Rhodes, the private-sector hero and his public-sector sidekick, must work together to defeat him.



The GM super-plant smolders, ready to detonate in *Iron Man 3* (Marvel Studios, 2013).



Maimed veterans become raw materials for a pro-active disaster capitalist in *Man 3* (Marvel Studios, 2013).

Lest we think that Monsanto would not use such a scenario for their benefit, Monsanto has refused to pledge *not* to sue farmers who claim that Monsanto seeds have colonized their stocks. The company declared,

> "A blanket covenant not to sue any present or future member of petitioners' organizations would enable virtually anyone to commit intentional infringement."[67]

Genetically modified plants propagate independent of farmers' volition, colonizing non-proprietary seed stocks, much as corporate media brands can propagate spontaneously through social networks of fans.[68]

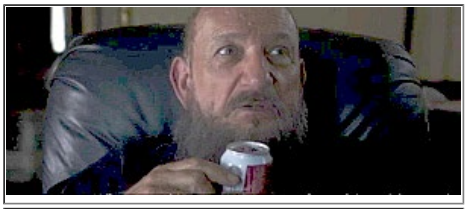
Iron Man III departs from its precursors' fixation on the copying of the Iron Man armor, but its narrative focuses on intellectual property in a way even closer to the neoliberal geopolitics of the 2000s. The first hint about the true nature of the villain appears in the form of a genetically modified plant that, when damaged, first regenerates and then explodes. The second hint appears in the spontaneous combustion of returning U.S. military veterans. These veterans have volunteered as test subjects for a mad-scientist-entrepreneur's experiments in the hope of recovering limbs they lost in war. "I'll own the War on Terror," crows the villain. "I'll create supply and demand!" He plans to monetize the cycle of US military intervention: using his biotechnology, a bogus "terrorist" network will strike targets worldwide, while he sells biotechnology to the U.S. military to regenerate maimed soldiers.



Advanced Idea Mechanics (AIM) conducts tests on maimed American veterans in *Iron Man 3* (Marvel Studios, 2013).



A mysterious terrorist calling himself "The Mandarin" claims responsibility for apparent suicide bombings on US soil in *Iron Man 3* (Marvel Studios, 2013). His video montages threaten ever greater carnage.

	
On of the AIM test subjects explodes outside TCL Chinese Theatre in *Iron Man 3* (Marvel Studios, 2013), in an attack mistaken for a suicide bombing. This setting seems unmotivated unless one knows that the Huizhou-based TCL Corporation, one of the world's largest manufacturers of televisions, bought naming rights to the Chinese Theatre a few months before the release of *Iron Man 3*.	The film's many attempts to reach the Mainland Chinese theatrical market also include changing the nationality of the Mandarin from Chinese (as in the comics) to American. In *Iron Man 3* (Marvel Studios, 2013), the villain hires a drugged-out British actor (Ben Kingsley) to play his fake terrorist mastermind, "The Mandarin," in threatening TV broadcasts.
	
"I'll own the War on Terror," declares terror-preneur Aldrich Killian (Guy Pearce) in *Iron Man 3* (Marvel Studios, 2013).	The "real" Mandarin, and the film's true villain, reveals Chinese-dragon tattoos in the climax of *Iron Man 3* (Marvel Studios, 2013).

The villain of *Iron Man III* thus presents a comic book version of what Naomi Klein has called "disaster capitalism," using and even engineering large-scale destruction to create commercial opportunities.[69] Like the neoliberals who rebuilt occupied Iraq for corporations, the villain of *Iron Man III* does not disdain state power. Unlike an Objectivist or an "anarcho-capitalist" he requires the state's intervention even as he subverts its purposes.

While Iraq represents an extreme example of the re-structuring a country's legal order for the benefit of corporations, it differs in tactics but not in strategy from Disney's intervention to promote the 1998 Copyright Term Extension Act (CTEA), which gave corporations an additional twenty years of rights to their intellectual property. The CTEA extended copyrights of individual works, but it also extended copyrights of corporate works—like those produced under the work-for-hire agreements at DC and Marvel—from seventy-five to ninety-five years after first publication.[70] Disney, as Wasko notes, "provided campaign contributions to ten of the 13 initial sponsors of the House bill and eight of the 12 sponsors of the Senate bill."[71] Without the CTEA, "Golden Age" comic-book characters like Captain America, the Human Torch, Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman would already have fallen into the public domain.

Critics of the CTEA call it the Mickey Mouse Protection Act, noting that every time copyright on the Mouse nears expiration, Disney and other powerful intellectual property holders lobby Congress to extend their claims. Derek Khanna, making what he calls "The Conservative Case for Taking on the Copyright Lobby," writes,

> "The recapture of works that would be in the public domain represents one of the biggest thefts of public property in history."[72]

Intellectual property law scholar Chris Sprigman calls out the owners of DC and Marvel by name:

> "The only reason to extend the term is to give private benefits to companies like Disney or Time Warner."[73]

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Lex Luthor steals Kryptonian technology and then pirates it in *Superman Returns* (Warner Brothers, 2006).

"Set apart from all other human organizations"

Warner Brothers' *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) reprises much from *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) and from *Superman II* (Richard Lester, 1980). Once again, Lex Luthor plots a land grab, but the DVD-era Luthor uses Kryptonian technology that he steals from Superman's Fortress of Solitude in the Arctic. Luthor compares himself to Prometheus, explaining the allusion for his moll and the audience:

> "Prometheus was a god who stole the power of fire from the other gods and gave control of it to mortals. In essence, he gave us technology. [...] I don't want to be a god. I just want to bring fire to the people. And I want my cut."



The 1978 *Superman: The Movie* showed only one Jor-El at a time, but here in *Superman Returns* (Warner Brothers, 2006) Lex Luthor conjures multiple apparitions. Marlon Brando's repeated images make visible the film's anxiety about scarcity and replication.



In *Superman Returns* (Warner Brothers, 2006), Luthor goes to Superman's Fortress of Solitude, where he gains unauthorized access to the Kryptonian data archive. "Tell me everything," he demands, "staring with crystals."



"I just want what Prometheus wanted," says Luthor in *Superman Returns* (Warner Brothers, 2006).



The camera pans to Luthor's bas-relief of Prometheus in *Superman Returns* (Warner Brothers, 2006).



In *Superman Returns* (Warner Brothers, 2006), Luthor not only steals Kryptonian technology, but he also steals the kryptonite that he plans to use against Superman. Here, we see the piece his goons drilled from a meteorite they stole from the Metropolis Museum of Natural History. Soon, Luthor will launch it into the



Lex Luthor cradles the seed of his kryptonite-laced continent in *Superman Returns* (Warner Brothers, 2006).

Atlantic to begin constructing his new landmass.	



In *Superman Returns* (Warner Brothers, 2006), the hero walks among the sooty crystals of Luthor's continent, not knowing that he they contain his undoing. Their darkness makes visible Luthor's moral evil.

Luthor seeds the ocean floor to begin growing a continent of towering crystals, but where the crystals of Superman's Fortress gleam white, Luthor's resemble coal, and their growth causes earthquakes that wreak havoc in Metropolis. The crags of Luthor's new continent make visible the moral contrast between him and Superman through their uses of Kryptonian technology. Superman possesses the complete archive of Kryptonian civilization, including their surveys of alien worlds in the "twenty-eight known galaxies," and he uses it to create a private Olympus where he can safeguard such wonders from a species not (yet) ready. Luthor uses the same knowledge to rupture continents, a scheme that he gleefully acknowledges will kill "billions."

As Miller et al. point out regarding U.S. intellectual property law, "copyright traditionally refuses to grant legitimacy to the pirated product as a form of social good."[74] [open endnotes in new window] In keeping with that stance, superhero films always present the unauthorized copying of the hero's intellectual property as a moral and social evil, even when the copiers present that copying as a good. In addition, these films always de-couple the superhero's stewardship of



Superman succumbs to kryptonite laced into the crystals of Luthor's artificial continent in *Superman Returns* (Warner Brothers, 2006).



Gene Hackman delivers lines in *Superman: The Movie* (Warner Brothers, 1978) that Kevin Spacey will repeat in *Superman Returns*.



Land so obsesses the 1978 Luthor of *Superman: The Movie* (Warner Brothers, 1978) that the floor of his hideout depicts a map of the United States in terrazzo. Using this map and a blackboard pointer, Luthor explains his land grab to Superman and the audience.



1978 footage of Marlon Brando (as Jor-El) faces 2006 footage of Kevin Spacey (as Lex Luthor) in *Superman Returns* (Warner Brothers, 2006).

intellectual property from his immediate economic interests: that is, no DC or Marvel hero adapted for the screen uses superpowers to make a living.[75] If villains copy the disinterested hero's intellectual property, he does not risk losing his livelihood, but millions of others risk losing their lives.

Outside the diegesis, we find two other motivations for this narrative of concentrated ownership and control. First, the norms of the Superman franchise require him to inhabit our recognizable world, not a science-fiction wonderland of humans using Kryptonian technology.[76] Second, and more fundamentally, Superman replicates the unaccountable way corporations manage intellectual property. Ordinary shareholders cannot vote on how executives use intellectual property; they can only buy in or cash out. The film does not entertain the possibility that Superman might have an obligation to share Kryptonian technology with his human hosts or that the presence of alien archives on Earth warrants consultation with humanity. Instead, it implies that Superman does right by keeping them beyond our reach.

Luthor's plan darkly mirrors Superman's custodial relation to Kryptonian intellectual property as well as Time Warner's own relationship to Superman texts. Although Luthor invokes Prometheus' radical sharing, he actually plans to control scarcity: "the rest of the world will be begging me for a piece of high-tech beachfront property. In fact, they'll pay through the nose for it." Land, for both the 1978 and 2006 versions of Luthor, constitutes an absolute limit on wealth. The 2006 version recites something his father used to tell him: "You can print money, manufacture diamonds, and people are a dime a dozen, but they'll always need land. It's the one thing they're not making any more of." Unwilling to settle for the existing limits on the availability of land, Luthor seeks to create new limits by demolishing North America. Miller et al. note,

> "Establishing scarcity through exclusivity is one of the enduring aims of copyright protection."[77]

Here, too, Luthor, performs the inverse of Superman's pro-social defense of intellectual property.

Moreover, Luthor performs a homicidal version of conventional marketing. In 1954, Peter F. Drucker influentially argued that marketing, and not manufacturing, trade, or the development of new commodities, constituted the unique feature of the commercial enterprise: "A business is set apart from all other human organizations by the fact that it markets a product or a service."[78] The creation of commodities takes second place to the act of creating demand:

> "Markets are not created by God, nature, or economic forces but by businessmen. [...] There may have been no want at all until business action created it [...] In every case it is business action that creates the customer."[79]

Luthor creates nothing, but he seeks to use the creations of now-anonymous Kryptonian scientists to manufacture demand. Luthor understands this logic because Time Warner understands it.

Luthor's speech about land sounds familiar because the 2006 Luthor repeats lines from the 1978 film. *Superman Returns* recycles much from the Christopher Reeve films, from the mise en scène of giant crystals, to John Williams's "Superman March," even to the re-used footage of Marlon Brando as the digital ghost of Jor-El, Superman's father. As Matt Yockey notes, this footage "confirms the link to the first Superman film," "distinguishes it from that film's three sequels, none of which featured Brando," and suggests "not only that Singer's film should be regarded as part of the canon but that it should occupy a privileged place

there."[79a] Brando and Reeve both died in 2004, so we can read the overdetermined nostalgia of *Superman Returns* as an allegory of another kind of scarcity: the scarcity of Superman movies themselves. We can reformulate Luthor's maxim accordingly:

> "Time Warner can print more comic books, manufacture DVDs, and screenwriters are a dime a dozen, but they'll always need Superman movies. The Christopher Reeve *Superman* films are the one thing they're not making more of."



In *Man of Steel* (Warner Brothers, 2013), the rogue Kryptonian General Zod explains his plan to turn the Earth into *Lebensraum* for the resurrected Kryptonians, a *Volk ohne Raum*.

Still, some dispute Time Warner's claims to Superman. The estates of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster have continued to challenge DC and Warners into the 21st century, long after the creators' deaths. In 2009 a judge ruled that Warners had to begin production of another Superman film by 2011 or face a suit from the Siegel estate for additional royalties.[80] The resultant film, *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013), takes the superhero as intellectual property to baroque extremes.

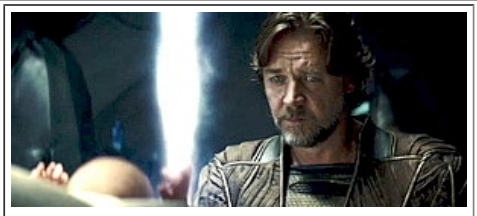


In *Man of Steel* (Warner Brothers, 2013), Kal-El imagines what would happen if General Zod should gain control of Krypton's lost Codex of genetic records—the science-fiction equivalent of a corporate "library of characters." Here, the Kent farm of Kal-El's Smallville boyhood becomes a morass of human skulls.

Snyder's Superman faces the Kryptonian rogue General Zod, who arrives on Earth with a band of fellow exiles. Zod seeks to recover a Codex holding the genetic codes of the people of their lost planet, which Zod believes came to Earth with the baby Superman. With this "library of characters" (to use the metaphor of intellectual property managers), Zod plans to re-constitute his dead race on Earth, incidentally exterminating humans. To overdetermine Zod's evil, the script also makes his plans explicitly racialist and genocidal, even toward Kryptonians: he plans not just to "save our race" but to "sever the degenerate bloodlines that led us to this state." Zod's forces cannot find the Codex, until the icy Kryptonian scientist Jax-Ur solves the mystery. Before Jor-El launched the infant Kal-El to earth, the father "took the Codex, the DNA of a billion people, and he bonded it within his son's individual cells—all Krypton's heirs, living, hidden in one refugee's body."



Kryptonian scientist Jax-Ur prepares medical torture for Superman as the villains hunt for the Codex in *Man of Steel* (Warner Brothers, 2013).



Jor-El inscribes the genetic codes of a billion unborn Kryptonians into the cells of his son before launching him to Earth in *Man of Steel* (Warner Brothers, 2013).

Jax-Ur's German accent obscures the Canadian nationality of the actor who plays him, Mackenzie Gray. On the Vancouver television show *The Rush*, Gray explained that when he auditioned for the part, the director surprised Gray by asking him to do the audition "in a German accent." Snyder "loved it" and gave Gray the role "on the spot."[81] Moreover, the filmmakers flew Gray to Chicago to rehearse with German actress Antje Traue, who would play another evil Kryptonian. According to Gray, "they wanted us to be from the same place, and Antje's got a German accent, and they wanted me to adopt that."[82] Traue, to my ear, does not sound recognizably German in the film, but Gray does. In contrast, General Zod, played by Michael Shannon (from Chicago), has a Midwestern U.S. accent, as does Superman, played by Henry Cavill (from England). What should we make of Gray's Hollywood-German accent?



On *The Rush* (Shaw TV, 2013), actor Mackenzie Gray explains being asked to play a Kryptonian with a German accent.

Jax-Ur uses a fine metallic probe to perform painful, invasive medical tests on the bound Superman, a refugee he considers dangerous to the Kryptonian race. In the context of Zod's plan to use the Earth as Kryptonian *Lebensraum*, Jax-Ur—with

his shaven head, high-collared black-and-gray uniform, and metallic torture-probe—sounds not merely German but Nazi German, somewhere between central-casting SS and Laurence Olivier's Dr. Szell from *Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger, 1976).



German actress Antje Traue plays one of the genocidal Krypto-fascists in *Man of Steel* (Warner Brothers, 2013).

Viewers recognized the character as an evocation of the Third Reich. Film-student blogger Joey Katz remarks on the "out of place" "evil Kryptonian Nazi scientist."[83] A forum regular at the *EyesSkyward* Superman fan site begins his complaint about the film,

> "what was up with crazy Nazi Kryptonian guy? [...] he has a weird Nazi scientist vibe. He even has what sounds like a German accent."[84]

However, these writers do not look into Gray's nationality or Snyder's request for the accent, they do not discuss the rhetorical function of Nazis as Hollywood and discussion-board shorthand for Bad Guys, and they do not consider lawsuit that forced Time Warner into production. The real-world heirs of Nazi-hating U.S. Jews Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster challenged Time Warner for larger shares of the franchise's profits, and the resulting film quietly offered a comparison: those who would challenge the distribution of Superman's intellectual property resemble the would-be enslavers of modern Europe.



In *Man of Steel* (Warner Brothers, 2013) Kryptonian Jax-Ur, played by Canadian Mackenzie Gray, announces the true location of the hidden library of characters: the body of "the refugee" Superman.



The Luthor of *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Warner Brothers, 2016) steals Kryptonian intellectual property in order to create a giant monster to defeat Superman, but he thereby endangers the entire planet.



Doomsday, Luthor's monster in *Batman v. Superman* (Warner Brothers, 2016), hails from DC Comics' bestselling *Death of Superman* (1992) story arc. However, the film re-imagines the monster as a parable of the evils of copying superhero IP. Its first blast shears the tops from half a dozen skyscrapers.



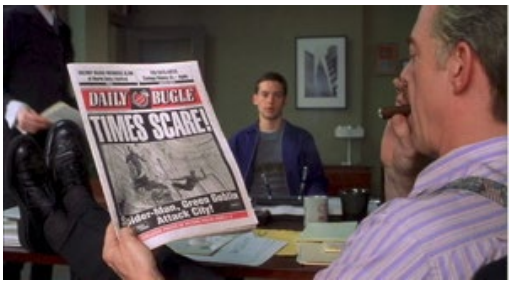
In *Batman v. Superman* (Warner Brothers, 2016), Doomsday becomes a walking series of explosions.

The sequel, *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016), offers a vision what happens when mere humans copy Kryptonian intellectual property. Lex Luthor, here rebooted as a mop-haired young tech billionaire, talks the US government into giving him access to Superman's Kryptonian ship and the corpse of General Zod. Luthor uses the ship's replication technology and Zod's DNA to create a hulking monster, which emits progressively larger blasts of destructive energy that even it cannot control. To the horrified Superman, Luthor identifies the monster as "Your doomsday!" Readers will recognize this brute as the Doomsday of the comics, who killed Superman in the 1992 *Death of Superman*

arc.

However, in the comics, Doomsday does not result from intellectual property theft but arrives on Earth already formed.[85] Furthermore, unlike Doomsday in the comics, who rages like Marvel's Hulk, the movie's Doomsday also endangers the whole planet with its energy blasts. So although General Zod in *Man of Steel* at least had a pro-social plan to resurrect the Kryptonians (albeit at the expense of humanity), Doomsday exists only to destroy. *Dawn of Justice* revises this comic-book character to fit the studio's melodrama of endangered intellectual property, making Doomsday threaten destruction without rebirth.

Interpellation, anamorphosis, and the phenomenology of the branded hero



In *Spider-Man* (Columbia, 2002), rent-seeking J. Jonah Jameson names the Green Goblin, then seeks to profit from that name.

Superhero blockbusters thus merge narrative, marketing, and pedagogy in a normative model of conduct toward intellectual property. Yet if we dismiss these films as mere commercial exercises, we miss the sophistication that the studios demonstrate not only in curating intellectual property but also in grooming their audiences for long-term engagement with the brand, an engagement that can include modes of ironic or even oppositional spectatorship. Business writer David A. Aaker explains the marketing strategy that he describes as the "brand-as-person":

> "Like a person, a brand can be perceived as being upscale, competent, impressive, trustworthy, fun, active, humorous, casual, formal, youthful, or intellectual. [...] it can help create a self-expressive benefit that becomes a vehicle for the customer to express his or her own personality. For example, an Apple user might identify himself or herself as casual, anti-corporate, and creative."[86]



"I want a quarter every time somebody says it!" barks J. Jonah Jameson in *Spider-Man* (Columbia, 2002).

For marketers, virtues of the self-sacrificing, altruistic, or anti-corporate hero can become elements of corporate brand equity. Whether viewers identify with the hero or oscillate among hero, villain, and others, these films offer audiences opportunities for pleasurable self-definition. I propose that we invert Aaker's formula and read the superhero as person-as-brand, to better parse the affective appeals of these films and the connection of those appeals to the goals of conglomerates.

Take a scene from the film that arguably established the comic-book superhero as the staple of 21st-century Hollywood: *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002). Crass, penny-pinching J. Jonah Jameson, editor of the tabloid *Daily Bugle*, has named the costumed villain who fought with Spider-Man in Times Square. "The Green Goblin!" says Jameson to Peter Parker. He barks at his assistant, "Hoffman, call the patent office! Copyright the name 'Green Goblin'—I want a quarter every time somebody says it!"



A wrestling promoter cheats Peter Parker out of winnings in *Spider-Man* (Columbia, 2002),

Irony works here on two levels. First, on the dramatic level: the audience, but not Jameson, knows Parker's secret identity as Spider-Man, whom Jameson sensationally presents as a "menace" to boost circulation. Yet on a second level the scene illustrates the logic of intellectual property and licensing while exaggerating it for comic effect. Actor J. K. Simmons, who plays Jameson, steals the scene with rapid delivery around a cigar. The film thereby reveals the marketing logic by which Marvel and Sony operate, but through the mouth of a character that the filmmakers expect us to enjoy disliking. Peter Parker has already learned, through his unwitting role in his Uncle Ben's murder, that he must never use his powers for financial gain, but Marvel, who licensed Sony Pictures Classics to produce the film, learns no such lesson. Neither does Sony; after all, the Goblin's first public

despite Peter's superhuman performance in the ring.



Just after the promoter cheats Peter, a gunman robs the promoter. Here, Peter, still resentful, will let the robber escape, in superhero comics' great moment of *hamartia*.



Through the closing door of the elevator, the robber says "Thanks!" to Peter Parker in *Spider-Man* (Columbia, 2002). Moments later, the same robber will carjack and murder Peter's Uncle Ben.



In the moment of tragic recognition that gives Spider-Man weight, Peter Parker recognizes his uncle's murderer as the same robber that he allowed to escape in *Spider-Man* (Columbia, 2002).

appearance in the film happened in Times Square, under the logos of dozens of real-world companies that struck product placement or brand partnership deals for the film.

In superhero blockbusters, the brand hides in the guise of the title character. In "The Purloined Letter," Poe's detective C. Auguste Dupin compares the methods of advertisers and the methods of a blackmailer who has hidden in plain sight the letter of title. Dupin asks the narrator,

> "have you ever noticed which of the street signs, over the shop doors, are the most attractive of attention? [...] the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious; and here the physical oversight is precisely analogous with the moral inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident."[87]

The superhero resembles these advertising slogans that we fail to recognize as such. We see the chevron on Superman's chest, or the spider on Spider-Man's back, but we see it as part of a costume, not as a trademark.

When Spider-Man lands atop a hurtling Carlsberg truck as he races to catch his uncle's murderer, we might notice that advertisers address us through product placement for beer, but we habitually forget that advertisers address us through the heroes themselves. David Bordwell, in homage to Poe's analysis of advertising seen but not recognized, called classical Hollywood "an excessively obvious cinema," but the superhero blockbuster exceeds classical norms in this regard.[88] The superhero's status as the commercial enunciation of Capital hides before our eyes, such that we recognize one layer of commercial address (the beer truck) while misrecognizing the other (the superhero).

As the superhero's melodrama of altruism engrosses us, his status as brand disappears through what Slavoj Žižek has called anamorphosis.[89] We see the other trademarks and brand names in the mise en scène, and we even might groan at Hollywood's crass handling of a character we remember fondly from comics or from other movies (far enough in our own pasts that we have forgotten their encrusting ads and product-placements).[90] However, we may still fail to recognize the superhero as the anamorphic object, the mis-seen blot with power to inflect the meaning of everything else in the composition.

In his analysis of *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007), Kirk Boyle describes the advertisements that still clutter the film's post-apocalyptic Manhattan as "anamorphic advertising," a mise en scène laden with corporate signifiers that register from the corner of the eye.[91] But the superhero film operates according to a bolder logic, one more like that of *The Ambassadors* by Holbein the Younger. In Žižek's analysis of that painting, the anamorphic element remains unintelligible "when viewed straightforwardly."[92] In superhero blockbusters, the film interpellates us into the straightforward viewing position from which we cannot see the hero as brand, a position somewhere between the popcorn-munching newcomer and the familiar, even jaded, long-time fan.

When viewed in the terms that the narrative offers us, the superhero remains understandable primarily as brand managers wish it understood. However, if "we look at the picture from a precisely determined perspective," the anamorphic element "suddenly acquires well-known contours."[93] As with the skull in *The Ambassadors*, our recognition of the superhero as brand shifts our interpretation of the whole text. The character becomes intelligible as the avatar of shareholder capital seeking to grow, an advertisement among advertisements, one that proclaims value rational altruism and self-sacrifice even as it advances the



Times Square in *Spider-Man* (Columbia, 2002), where Spider-Man and the Green Goblin fight beneath advertisements.



In a film like *Spider-Man* (Columbia, 2002), we may note that Carlsberg advertises to us, but we probably forget that Columbia's parent Sony uses the whole film to cross-promote its Spider-Man computer games.



The anamorphotic blot hides in the foreground of Hans Holbein the Younger's *Ambassadors*, 1533, oil on oak, 207 cm × 209.5 cm, National Gallery (London).

instrumentally rational goals of corporations.

Conclusion

Film scripts address a potential audience of moviegoers, but they must first address an actual audience of executives who vet and shape scripts according to the needs of the company. Imagine a thousand screenwriters, their scripts filtered through a board of ten executives, each keen to protect and exploit intellectual property: the selective pressure of such a board would produce the Hollywood superhero blockbuster's obsession over intellectual property. Screenplays that make the cut appeal simultaneously to a mass audience and to producers anxious to curate the company's intellectual property.

Risk-averse corporations have economic incentives for updating and re-using established narrative brands, but we need not see this as dooming proprietary characters to serve always and only reactionary or acquisitive ends. Both superheroes and supervillains appeal to audiences by offering glimpses of ways to live outside the logic of neoliberal capitalism, which reduces everything to market value. Yet we must remember that media conglomerates use the virtues of the superhero to pursue the vices of the huckster; they interpellate us into admiration of the hero to encourage our repeat purchases.

My proposal to read the superhero first as brand and second as character offers a materialist approach to these texts that acknowledges the pleasures they offer while resisting the reification of corporate brands. Stories of branded heroes offer audiences the pleasures of canonicity and authenticity coupled with innovation within parameters. Yet as scholars and teachers we should also attend to the pleasures of the off-brand, the subversively generic. Within the comics duopoly, titles like *Watchmen* or *Squadron Supreme* use generic versions of familiar characters to critique the narrative conventions and political economy of superhero narratives; outside the duopoly, we see other critiques from titles like WildStorm's *Stormwatch* and Image Comics' *Astro City*.

Superhero narratives need not serve purely as instruments of capital because of their genre, and even conglomerate productions like *Deadpool* (Tim Miller, 2016) show that superhero movies need not trudge through the routines of marketing-department "best practices" in order to succeed with audiences and critics. Reading DC and Marvel superhero movies as allegories of intellectual property offers a method for better understanding how these films try to use character and narrative to monetize the same impulses that also empower us to critique and resist the neoliberal order.

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64. "Order 81," *CPA Official Documents*, The Coalition Provisional Authority, last updated April 26, 2004, page 16, http://www.iraqcoalition.org/regulations/20040426_CPAORD_81_Patents_Law.pdf.

65. Nancy Scola, "Why Iraqi Farmers Might Prefer Death to Paul Bremer's Order 81," *AlterNet*, last updated September 18, 2008, http://www.alternet.org/story/62273/why_iraqi_farmers_might_prefer_death_to_paul_bremer's_order_81.

66. Ibid.

67. Quoted in "Monsanto Critics Denied U.S. Supreme Court Hearing on Seed Patents," *Reuters.com*, Reuters, last updated January 13, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-court-monsanto-idUSBREA0C10H20140113.

68. Fans may think of themselves as oppositional or anti-corporate, yet their playful fandom becomes what Dallas Smythe called "off-the-job work time," unremunerated labor on behalf of shareholders they will never meet. See "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Joural of Political and Social Theory*, vol. 1, no. 3 (1977), 3.

69. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

70. "Sonny Bono Copyright Term Extension Act," United States Copyright Office, October 27, 1998, http://www.copyright.gov/legislation/s505.pdf.

71. Janet Wasko, *Understanding Disney: The Manufacture of Fantasy* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), 86.

72. Derek Khanna, "The Conservative Case for Taking on the Copyright Lobby," *Business Insider*, April 30, 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/time-to-confront-the-copyright-lobby-2014-4.

73. Quoted in Timothy B. Lee, "15 Years Ago, Congress Kept Mickey Mouse out of the Public Domain. Will they Do it Again?" *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2013/10/25/15-years-ago-congress-kept-mickey-mouse-out-of-the-public-domain-will-they-do-it-again/.

74. Toby Miller, Nitin Govil, John McMurria, and Richard Maxwell, *Global Hollywood*, (London: British Film Institute, 2001), 116. [return to page 3]

75. That is, DC and Marvel superheroes don't use their powers to make a living by, say, winning athletic contests or mining gold from the Moon. At best, gaining superpowers allows them to start living the mansion of an already-rich team leader, seemingly rent-free (though the movies never provide such details).

Even Marvel's Avengers, who ostensibly serve the US government, don't apply to join the group in order to make a living. In C*aptain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011), Steve Rogers enlists in the Army before gaining his super-soldier powers, such that his later service extends this military career.

76. In the 1986 graphic novel *Watchmen*, Alan Moore violates this convention of the superhero genre in the terms of the Prometheus myth: the godlike super-scientist Dr. Manhattan creates technologies that change everyday life, such as rechargeable electric cars used by the Promethean Cab Company. Their slogan, "Bringing Light to the World," makes clear Moore's revisionist impulse. *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comics, 2005), chapter 3, page 22 [not continuously paginated].

77. Miller et al., 127.

78. Peter Drucker, *The Practice of Management*, 1954 (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 38.

79. Ibid., 37.

79a. Matt Yockey, "Somewhere in Time: Utopia and the Return of Superman," *The Velvet Light Trap*, no. 61 (2008), 31, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/232121/

80. Dave McNary, "Warner Bros. Wins *Superman* Case," *Variety*, July 8, 2009, http://variety.com/2009/film/markets-festivals/warner-bros-wins-superman-case-1118005806/.

81. "Actor Mackenzie Gray," YouTubevideo, 12:31, from *The Rush* broadcast on *Shaw TV* on June 19, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XGasQcUukvM.

82. Ibid.

83. Joey Katz, "The Rewatch: Man of Steel," *Agnes Farta Weekly*, last modified June 17, 2015, http://agnesweekly.weebly.com/blog/the-rewatch-man-of-steel.

84. Vadakin [pseudonym], post no.1658, *EyesSkyward.com*, June 26, 2013, http://www.eyesskyward.com/forum/showthread.php?1750-Man-of-Steel-COMPLETE-SPOILER-Discussion&p=178829&viewfull=1.

85. The comics' Doomsday results from a Kryptonian mad scientist's attempt to

create an unkillable super-being. See Dan Jurgens and Brett Breeding, *Superman/Doomsday: Hunter/Prey*, volumes 2 and 3 (1994), DC Comics.

86. David Aaker, *Building Strong Brands* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 83-84.

87. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Purloined Letter," 1844, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 345.

88. David Bordwell, "An Excessively Obvious Cinema," in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, by David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger (New York: Columbia UP, 1985), 11.

89. Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1992), 90.

90. These include, for instance, the full-page ads for Hostess snack cakes that once appeared in Marvel comics.

91. Kirk Boyle, "*Children of Men* and *I Am Legend*: the Disaster-Capitalism Complex Hits Hollywood," *Jump Cut*. 51 (Spring 2009), 2, http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/ChildrenMenLegend/text.html.

92. Žižek, 90.

93. Ibid.

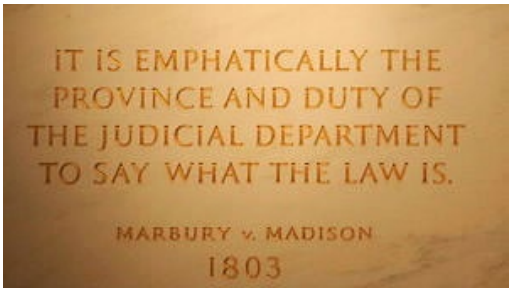
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The Hurt Locker litigation: an adult's story—part 2

by Robert Alpert



In 1803 the US Supreme Court holds that the US is a government of "laws, and not of men" and the Court is the final arbiter of what that law is.

The U.S. Supreme Court famously declared in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803) that the "[g]overnment of the United States has been emphatically termed a government of laws, and not of men."[1][open endnotes in new window] It also, however, observed that it "is emphatically the province and duty of the Judicial Department [that is, the courts] to say what the law is." Thus, while holding that the U.S. Constitution overrides any other law, the Court also held that the U.S. Supreme Court is the final arbiter of what the U.S. Constitution means, thereby, not incidentally, granting to itself the final say over the other two branches of government, Congress and the President, as to the interpretation of this supreme law. Tellingly, however, the Supreme Court in *Marbury* also famously observed, "The very essence of civil liberty certainly consists in the right of every individual to claim the protection of the laws whenever he receives an injury." Thus, government "will certainly cease to deserve this high appellation if the laws furnish no remedy for the violation of a vested legal right." Now, over 200 years later this same Court effectively offered no remedy in affirming the sanctity of corporate contracts that compel arbitration and bar class actions.[2] Laws, including their judicial interpretation, are inevitably constructs of cultural values.


The New York Times

LYNDON JOHNSON, 36TH PRESIDENT, IS DEAD; WAS ARCHITECT OF 'GREAT SOCIETY' PROGRAM

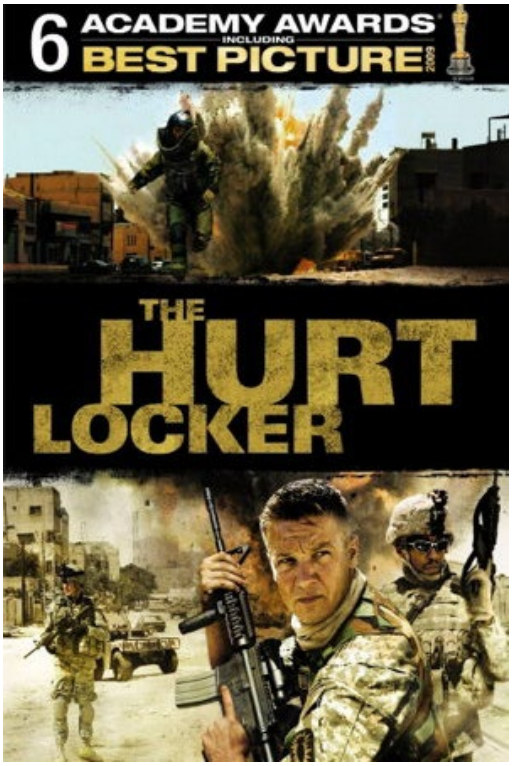
High Court Rules Abortions Legal the First 3 Months

State Bans Ruled Out Until Last 10 Weeks

In 1973 the Supreme Court finds a right of privacy in the US Constitution that entitles women the right to choose to have an abortion.



In 2010 the Supreme Court finds that the First Amendment of the US Constitution bars Congress from restricting independent financial contributions to political campaigns by non-profit corporations. Corporations are persons entitled to free speech rights, and financial contributions are a form of speech. Citizens United, a non-profit corporation, may, therefore, air its film critical of presidential candidate Hillary Clinton.



The Hurt Locker, while not a blockbuster, garners all of the major Oscar awards for 2009.

Judges, both in applying the rule of law and in deciding what the rule of law is, approach the law with cultural biases. As such, judicial opinions are as much an art as a science and inevitably reflect such biases. Those on the left are pleased when the U.S. Supreme Court finds a right of privacy in the U.S. Constitution and hence invalidates laws that bar or unnecessarily restrict abortion.[3] Those on right, however, are equally pleased when the U.S. Supreme Court interprets the right of free speech in the U.S. Constitution as sufficiently broad so as to invalidate laws that bar or unnecessarily restrict the right of corporations to express their opinions by contributing financially to political campaigns.[4] Both decisions reflect how judges reach their decisions based on cultural ideology, drawing support for their decisions from carefully selected precedent. While law and morality are not the same, both arise from intangible, cultural values—values that are often assumed but unstated.

The Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit's recent decision involving Staff Sergeant Jeffrey Sarver's lawsuit against the creators and producers of the movie *The Hurt Locker* reflects the greater value the United States places upon money and free speech at the expense individual privacy. In this case, if the judicial bias was reasonably clear, nevertheless support was arguably difficult to find given the intervening precedential decisions. Faced with those decisions, the opinion in *The Hurt Locker* case tilts in favor of free speech while also making explicit, however, the commercial element of free speech in what is often described as the "marketplace of ideas."[5]



Jeremy Renner portrays Sgt. William James, the team leader in Iraq of an ordinance disposal unit.



Sgt. James is uniquely successful in disarming improvised explosive devices.



A few years earlier, the movie's screenwriter, Mark Boal, had written for *Playboy* an article about Sgt. Jeffrey Sarver, the team leader of an EOD unit that disarmed IEDs. Renner later acknowledges that the makers of the movie modeled his behavior as Sgt. James on real-life Sgt. Sarver.



Shortly before the Oscars are announced, Sarver sues the movie's director, Kathryn Bigelow, screenwriter Boal and the producers for violation of his right of publicity.

The movie *The Hurt Locker*, which Kathryn Bigelow had directed, was released in



the United States in June 2009. In March 2010 Bigelow as well as the movie's screenwriter, Mark Boal, received Oscars for Best Directing and Best Screenwriting (Original Screenplay), respectively. The Academy also awarded the movie an Oscar for Best Picture. On the eve of these awards, Staff Sergeant Jeffrey Sarver sued Bigelow, Boal and the producers of the movie in federal court in New Jersey. He alleged, in essence, that Boal had been embedded with Sarver's explosive ordinance disposal ("EOD") unit that undertook the daily task of disarming in Iraq improvised explosive devices ("IEDs") and that the movie in its depiction of Sergeant William James (played by Jeremy Renner) had appropriated Sarver's life in the U.S. army as the team leader of that unit. As such, the defendants had invaded his privacy; in particular, they had violated his "right of publicity" by commercializing his life story as well as, among other claims, casting him in a false light.

Following the transfer of the lawsuit from New Jersey to California, the federal trial court in Los Angeles on October 13, 2011, dismissed all of Sarver's claims under California's anti-SLAPP law,[6] a law that seeks to protect against the chilling effect on free speech rights of frivolous lawsuits. SLAPP is an abbreviation for "Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation," and a SLAPP lawsuit is intended to silence speech by imposing the expense of litigation on the speaker.

In contrast, an anti-SLAPP law seeks to prevent this by imposing special procedural requirements on those bringing such suits. In California the filing of a motion to dismiss under the anti-SLAPP law automatically stays discovery, and it may result in the party bringing the lawsuit having to demonstrate a probability of success without the benefit of discovery. California's anti-SLAPP law may also impose sanctions on the party bringing the lawsuit, namely the payment of the

Hugo Zaccini, an entertainer, performs a "human cannonball" act in which he is shot into a net 200 feet away. The act lasts 15 seconds.



A broadcasting company films and broadcasts the entire act on its 11 o'clock TV news program. Zaccini sues for the "misappropriation" of his act.



The US Supreme Court in 1977 holds that the station is not protected by free speech under the US Constitution's First Amendment. Instead it upholds Zacchini's right of publicity claim, finding that he's entitled to be paid.

defendant's expenses if the suit is successfully dismissed. In dismissing Sergeant Sarver's claims prior to his taking any discovery, the trial court held that his right of publicity claim, in particular, was barred as a matter of law. The court ruled that the movie in its depiction of events was the type of "transformative use" that is protected as free speech by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The trial court also ordered Sarver to pay the defendants' litigation expenses of $187,000.

Sarver appealed that decision to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) that represents the movie industry joined the defendants as amicus curiae in seeking an affirmance of the trial court's decision. The MPAA argued for a broad application of the First Amendment in right of publicity cases brought against movies. By May 2013 the parties had fully submitted their briefs as well as argued the merits of their position. A more detailed discussion of these initial proceedings, both those before the trial court and the appellate filings, may be found in part 1 of "*The Hurt Locker* litigation: an adult's story," *Jump Cut*, No. 54 (Fall 2012).

Nearly three years later, on February 17, 2016, the Ninth Circuit issued a unanimous opinion, *Sarver v. Chartier* (9th Cir. 2016), in which it affirmed the trial court's decision.[7] It strikingly affirmed the trial court on grounds that none of the parties had argued. The reasoning of its opinion underscores the importance of commerce in the "marketplace of ideas." A few months later, on April 22, 2016, the Court also denied Sarver's request for a rehearing or an *en banc* consideration of his appeal.[8]

The lengthy history leading to the decision on appeal

Why the delay of several years in issuing this unanimous opinion?

The delay is, in part, explained by the Ninth Circuit's order on May 9, 2013, in which it expressly deferred issuing any opinion on Sarver's appeal "pending the disposition of the petition for rehearing *en banc* in *Makaeff v. Trump University*, LLC."[9] That case involved a class action lawsuit in which the lead plaintiff and others alleged that Trump University had induced them to pay tuition for real estate investment seminars based on fraudulent advertising claims. The rehearing at issue, if granted, sought to challenge California's anti-SLAPP law. In fact, however, the Ninth Circuit denied that rehearing in November 2013.

The delay is also, therefore, explained, in part, by two intervening opinions on the right of publicity, *Keller v. Electronic Arts* (9th Cir. 2013) and *Davis v. Electronic Arts* (9th Cir. 2015). Both cases involved athletes' right of publicity claims against a video game maker, and both opinions, in construing a First Amendment defense, found against the video game maker. These decisions cast doubt on the grounds for the trial court's decision in Sarver's case. Thus, the Ninth Circuit on October 29, 2013,

> "further deferred [the appeal in Sarver's case] pending the disposition of the petitions for certiorari [filed by the video gamer maker before the U.S. Supreme Court] in *Keller v. Electronic Arts Inc.* (*In re NCAA Student Athlete Name & Likeness Licensing Litig.*)."[10]

While the plaintiff athletes in *Keller* had settled with the defendants by mid-2014, [11] a petition for certiorari in *Davis* remained pending. Nevertheless, on the eve of Christmas, the Ninth Circuit restored Sarver's appeal for consideration and decision in response to Sarver's request on December 3, 2015 inquiring about the status of his appeal.[12]



The California Supreme Court holds in 2001 that there is no right of publicity claim where the media's use is "transformative" and hence protected under the First Amendment. Prints and t-shirts with this charcoal sketch of the Three Stooges are not "transformative."



In contrast, the Tenth Circuit holds that limited edition prints depicting celebrated golfer Tiger Woods' historic victory at the 1997 Masters Tournament is protected by the First Amendment. It dismisses Woods' right of publicity claim.

The *Trump University* case, the initial basis for the suspension for Sarver's appeal, seemed on its face an odd reason to defer a decision. In response to the class action alleging fraud, Trump University had counterclaimed against the lead plaintiff, Tarla Makaeff, for defamation. The Court of Appeals had reversed the trial court's decision on defendant Trump University's counterclaim, holding that Trump University was a "limited public figure" so that Trump University must meet a higher standard, namely "actual malice," if it were to prevail in its defamation counterclaim. On that particular ground the Court remanded the case back to the trial court to determine whether under that higher standard Trump University had a reasonable probability of success in defeating the plaintiff Makeaeff's anti-SLAPP motion.

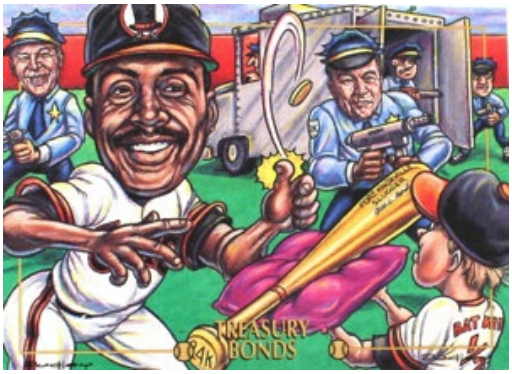
Significantly, however, two of the judges in *Trump University* also issued a joint, concurring opinion in which they openly questioned the correctness of *United States ex rel. Newsham v. Lockheed Missiles & Space Co.* (9th Cir. 1999) and those cases that had followed that decision. According to these concurring judges, *Lockheed* had incorrectly held that California's anti-SLAPP law did not "collide" with the procedures of—and could be applied in—federal courts by permitting a motion to strike and awarding attorney's fees in the context of such a motion. In other words, they questioned the underpinning of the anti-SLAPP law that had resulted in the summary dismissal of Sarver's lawsuit.

The Ninth Circuit in November 2013 in a sharply divided opinion rejected the proposed rehearing of the *Trump University* appeal. In denying the rehearing, the prevailing judges reasoned:

> "...California's anti-SLAPP statute seeks to limit frivolous suits brought primarily for the purpose of chilling the valid exercise of First Amendment rights. ...."
>
> "Through anti-SLAPP laws, the legislatures of Arizona, California, Guam, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington have decided to impose substantive limitations on certain state law actions...Refusing to recognize these limitations in federal court is bad policy. If we ignore how states have limited actions under their own laws, we not only flush away state legislatures' considered decisions on matters of state law, but we also put the federal courts at risk of being swept away in a rising tide of frivolous state actions that would be filed in our circuit's federal courts."[13]

In contrast, based on a lengthy and technical analysis of federal court procedures, the dissenting judges reasoned:

> "California's anti- SLAPP statute impermissibly supplements the Federal Rules' criteria for pre-trial dismissal of an action. ..."
>
> "Any attempt to impose a probability requirement at the pleading stage would obviously conflict with [Federal Civil Procedure] Rule 12. Yet that is exactly what California's anti-SLAPP statute does. It bars an action from proceeding beyond the pleading stage 'unless the court determines that the plaintiff has established that there is a probability that the plaintiff will prevail on the claim.' ..."
>
> "Similar problems plague the interaction between California's anti-SLAPP statute and [Federal Civil Procedure] Rule 56. Motions to strike almost invariably require consideration of matters outside the pleadings, and in those circumstances the Federal Rules state that 'the



The Tenth Circuit is amused by "parody trading cards" and dismisses the right of publicity claim brought by major league baseball players.



Gwen Stafani and Tony Kanal are two members of the California rock band No Doubt.



Following the "transformative use" test articulated in the "Three Stooges" case, a California appeals court in early 2011 holds that Activision's video game depicting the No Doubt band is not "transformative".

> motion must be treated as one for summary judgment under Rule 56.'...The anti-SLAPP statute eviscerates Rule 56 by requiring the plaintiff to prove that she will probably prevail if the case proceeds to trial—a showing considerably more stringent than identifying material factual disputes that a jury could reasonably resolve in the plaintiff's favor."[14]

Not surprisingly, the dissenters cited *Metabolife International, Inc. v. Wornick* (9th Cir. 2001). In that case the Ninth Circuit had noted the "collision" between the discovery normally permitted in federal courts and the stay of discovery automatically imposed as a result of the application of California's anti-SLAPP law in the context of a motion to dismiss, such as the one successfully argued in Sarver's case and that had barred his taking discovery.

In essence, the prevailing judges relied upon their view that California's anti-SLAPP law promoted free speech in preventing frivolous lawsuits against the media and that states may fashion the scope of rights for such laws that the states have themselves enacted. In contrast, the dissenting judges tilted in favor of due process under the federal procedural rules and their view that federalism requires that state rights yield to such rules. This differing view is reflected in the arguments in Sarver's case. Bigelow, Boal, and their Hollywood producers had argued that California's anti-SLAPP law protects free speech by requiring a higher bar so as to prevent an encroachment upon creativity. In contrast, Sarver had argued his entitlement under federal rules to take discovery so as to develop an evidentiary record for his claims. In denying the rehearing in the *Trump University* case, the Ninth Circuit, in effect, sided with the defendants.

The *Trump University* case, however, does not wholly explain the three-year delay. The delay is also explained by the Ninth Circuit's decisions in *Keller v. Electronic Arts* (9th Cir. 2013), issued only a few months after suspending Sarver's appeal based on the *Trump University* case, and in *Davis v. Electronic Arts* (9th Cir. 2015). Both decisions ran contrary to the reasoning of the trial court's decision in Sarver's case.

In the *Keller* case the Ninth Circuit acknowledged that video games "are entitled to the full protections of the First Amendment," citing the U.S. Supreme Court's unequivocal holding in *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* (2011) that video games are entitled to the same protection of free speech under the First Amendment as all other communications media, including movies.[15] The Ninth Circuit then succinctly summarized the facts:

> "Samuel Keller was the starting quarterback for Arizona State University in 2005 before he transferred to the University of Nebraska, where he played during the 2007 season. [Electronic Arts or] EA is the producer of the NCAA Football series of video games, which allow users to control avatars representing college football players as those avatars participate in simulated games. In NCAA Football, EA seeks to replicate each school's entire team as accurately as possible."[16]



In mid-2011 the US Supreme Court strikes down California's ban on sales of violent video games to children. "Like the protected books, plays, and movies…., video games communicate ideas…..through many familiar literary devices….and features distinctive to the medium. That suffices to confer First Amendment protection."



Samuel Keller was a starting quarterback for Arizona State University. He sues EA, the maker of a video game, for violation of his right of publicity.

While readily finding that Keller's "suit arises from an act by [EA] made in connection with a public issue in furtherance of [EA's] right to free speech,"[17] the Court went on to find, however, that Keller had established a "reasonable probability that [he] will prevail on his…claim…by a prima facie showing of facts…"[18] According to the Court, Keller made that showing, since EA's use of Keller's image was not "transformative"—and hence was not privileged as free speech—but instead potentially violated Keller's right of publicity. Whether a work is "transformative" depends, according to precedent established by the California Supreme Court[19] and followed by the Ninth Circuit, on

> "whether the celebrity likeness is one of the 'raw materials' from which an original work is synthesized, or whether the depiction or imitation of the celebrity is the very sum and substance of the work in question."

In this case the Court analogized to the precedent of a state court case, *No Doubt v. Activision Publishing* (Ca. Ct. App. 2011), in which the defendant Activision's *Band Hero* video game was found not transformative by enabling users to simulate performing rock bands, including the band No Doubt. In effect, the video game added nothing to the depiction of the rock bands but simply duplicated their performance in the form of a video game.



Citing the "No Doubt" case, the Ninth Circuit in 2013 finds that EA's video game that simulates an NCAA football game with Keller and others as avatars isn't "transformative."



The Ninth Circuit reaffirms the "Keller" case in 2015 when Michael Davis, Billy Joe Dupree and 6,000 other former NFL players sue EA for violation of their right of publicity by the use of their avatars.

The Ninth Circuit in *Keller* observed that as in *No Doubt*

> "[u]sers manipulate the characters in the performance of the same activity for which they are known in real life—playing football in this case, and performing in a rock band in *Band Hero*. …"
>
> "We believe *No Doubt* offers a persuasive precedent that cannot be materially distinguished from Keller's case."[20]

The Court drew further support for its holding by noting that another U.S. Court of Appeals, the Third Circuit, had likewise found EA's video game under the same facts was not transformative and hence not protected by free speech.[21] The Ninth Circuit summarized:

> "Given that NCAA Football realistically portrays college football players in the context of college football games, the district court was correct in concluding that EA cannot prevail as a matter of law based

> on the transformative use defense at the anti-SLAPP stage." [22]

Moreover, in reaching its conclusion, the Court also implicitly expressed its skepticism about video games as a medium of communication. Thus, the Court rejected a separate defense by EA that it was entitled to the statutory defense under California law as the publisher or reporter of newsworthy items.

> "We think that…EA is not publishing or reporting factual data. EA's video game is a means by which users can play their own virtual football games, not a means for obtaining information about real-world football games…Put simply, EA's interactive game is not a publication of facts about college football; it is a game, not a reference source. These state law defenses, therefore, do not apply." [23]

Thus, the Court acknowledged that video games generally are entitled to protection under the First Amendment and that the video game in this particular instance duplicated as accurately as possible the factual characteristics of Keller and other athletes. At the same time, the Court limited the scope of that protection given that video games entertain rather than serve, in its view, as a "reference source."[24]

Examining EA's video game, the dissenting judge reached a contrary conclusion, finding that the creative, transformative elements predominated. Significantly, his reasoning makes the very arguments that the defendants and the MPAA had made in Sarver's appeal, an appeal that the Ninth Circuit had in the meantime suspended.

> "The logical consequence of the majority view is that all realistic depictions of actual persons, no matter how incidental, are protected by a state law right of publicity regardless of the creative context. This logic jeopardizes the creative use of historic figures in motion pictures, books, and sound recordings."[25]

Thus, for example, the MPAA had argued in Sarver's case that motion pictures, like books and other writings throughout history, draw upon "actual events and people," identifying such well-known films as *The King's Speech*, *Erin Brockovich, The Perfect Storm* and *The Social Network*, and that if Sarver's claim were upheld, then numerous films would never have been made, such as *Citizen Kane*, *Saving Private Ryan* or *Titanic*.

Given the majority's holding in *Keller*, it was inevitable that two years later in 2015 the Ninth Circuit in the *Davis* case would reaffirm that the right of publicity claims of professional athletes, as opposed to the college athletes in *Keller*, prevail over the free speech rights of the same video game maker. Consistent with *Keller*, the Ninth Circuit held that

> "…EA's use of the former players' likenesses is not incidental, because it is central to EA's main commercial purpose—to create a realistic virtual simulation of football games involving current and former NFL teams."[26]

In *Davis* the professional athletes consisted of "Michael Davis and Billy Joe Dupree, as well as roughly 6,000 other former [National Football League or] NFL players who appear on more than 100 historic teams in various editions of Madden NFL."[27] Not distinguishing between college and professional athletes given their common commercial interest in being compensated,[28] the Court, not surprisingly, upheld the professional athletes' claims, since the depiction of these athletes was central to the performance and narrative of the video game.

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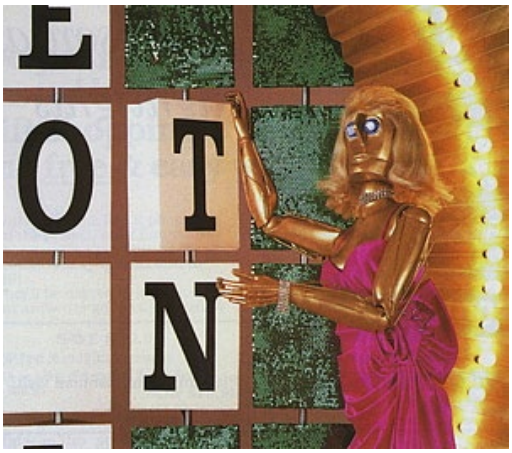


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The Hurt Locker decision on appeal



Vanna White is the well-known hostess to the TV show *Wheel of Fortune*.



In 1992 the Ninth Circuit was not amused and upheld White's right of publicity claim against Samsung for depicting in an ad for consumer electronics a robot that evoked White's gameshow appearance.

At the time that the trial court had issued its decision, it was arguably unclear how the Ninth Circuit would balance free speech against Sarver's privacy right. If, however, that balance was to tilt in favor of the movie industry and free speech and against Sarver, how reconcile that tilting following *Keller* and *Davis* in which the Court had reasoned that the characters in the video games performed "the same activity for which they are known in real life?" Didn't the movie *The Hurt Locker* likewise depict Sarver in the same activity for which he was known? If "*No Doubt* offers a persuasive precedent that cannot be materially distinguished," don't *Keller* and *Davis* do likewise in Sarver's case? The Court's reconciliation of those decisions with Sarver's case surely surprised all of the parties.

Thus, initially and surprisingly, the Court in Sarver's case—after holding that California law, not New Jersey law, applied to the dispute, in part, because of the importance to California of its anti-SLAPP law—reiterated the *Metabolife* holding that the discovery rules under California's anti-SLAPP law "collided" with federal procedural rules. Ironically, it did so in order to uphold the timeliness of the defendants' motion to strike under California's anti-SLAPP law, since that state law would have barred as untimely the defendants' motion. The Court held that this timing rule under California's anti-SLAPP law collided with the federal procedural rule that permitted such a filing. The Court otherwise, though, disregarded the collision, not addressing whether Sarver was entitled to discovery or should be subject to the higher burden of proof imposed by an anti-SLAPP motion. In denying a rehearing in the *Trump University* case, the Ninth Circuit had effectively foreclosed these arguments—even as it cited the "collision" in order to permit the defendants' otherwise untimely anti-SLAPP motion.

Turning thereafter to the merits of the motion, the Court, citing *Keller*, observed,

> "California's anti-SLAPP statute is designed to discourage suits that 'masquerade as ordinary lawsuits but are brought to deter common citizens from exercising their political or legal rights or to punish them for doing so.'"[29]

As in *Keller*, the Court readily found that the movie *The Hurt Locker* involved a matter of public interest, namely a portrayal of the war in Iraq and the use of IEDs.

The Ninth Circuit now turned to central issue, namely whether the production of the movie was privileged under the First Amendment. In contrast to *Keller* and *Davis*, however, the Court began its discussion with the observation that states may not impose "content-based" restrictions on speech. It said that the U.S. Supreme Court in *Zacchini v. Scripps-Howard Broadcasting* (1977) had upheld a state right of publicity claim only because the broadcaster had appropriated the entertainer's entire "cannonball" act, thereby seeking to obtain for free that which had an economic market value. Noting that the Supreme Court had not revisited the appropriate balance between a state right of publicity claim and the U.S. First Amendment (and, in fact, within a month declined to hear the appeal in *Davis*), the Court described how the Ninth Circuit had "interpreted *Zacchini* to uphold the right of publicity in a variety of contexts where the defendant appropriates the



Wikipedia describes celebrity Paris Hilton as “an American businesswoman, socialite, television personality, model, actress, singer, DJ, and author.”

economic value that the plaintiff has built in an identity or performance.”[30]

The Court cited, among others, as examples of that interpretation the *Keller* and *Davis* cases as well as *Hilton v. Hallmark Cards* (9th Cir. 2010), in which the image of celebrity Paris Hilton had appeared on greeting cards in a setting similar to a TV episode for which she was known. It also cited *White v. Samsung Electronics America Inc.* (9th Cir. 1992), where the image of celebrity game show hostess Vanna White was evoked in an advertisement for Samsung electronics in the form of a robot appearing on a set resembling her game show. The *White* case, according to the Court, advanced “the state’s interest is in preventing ‘the exploitation of celebrity to sell products, and an attempt to take a free ride on a celebrity’s celebrity value.’”

> “In sum, our precedents have held that speech which either appropriates the economic value of a performance or persona or seeks to capitalize off a celebrity’s image in commercial advertisements is unprotected by the First Amendment against a California right-of-publicity claim.”[31]

Thus, the Court in footnote 6 further explained that it “need not and do[es] not reach the question of whether such defense [i.e. the “transformative use” defense] applies in this case.”



Hilton uttered - and became associated with - the phrase “that’s hot” while appearing as a waitress in an episode on the TV show *The Simple Life*.



In 2010 the Ninth Circuit declines to dismiss on free speech grounds Hilton’s right of publicity claim against Hallmark Cards. While finding the birthday card a “spoof”, it holds that the card is not sufficiently “transformative."

Given, however, the Court’s view that a right of publicity claim may prevail over a free speech defense only where the plaintiff demonstrates “an economic value,”



Distinguishing *Keller* and *Davis* as well as *White* and *Hilton*, the Ninth Circuit dismisses under California's anti-SLAPP law team leader Sarver's right of publicity claim. He has "not exploited the economic value of any performance or persona he had worked to develop."



According to the Ninth Circuit, California's anti-SLAPP law "is designed to discourage suits that 'masquerade as ordinary lawsuits but are brought to deter common citizens from exercising their political or legal rights or to punish them for doing so.'" Recently retired from the US Army, Sarver must now pay the substantial legal expenses of the filmmakers.



the Court readily distinguished Sarver's appeal from precedent, including *Keller* and *Davis*.

> "First, The Hurt Locker is not speech proposing a commercial transaction." ...
>
> "Second, and critically, unlike the plaintiffs in *Zacchini*, *Hilton*, and *Keller*, Sarver did not "make the investment required to produce a performance of interest to the public"... or invest time and money to build up economic value in a marketable performance or identity... Rather, Sarver is a private person who lived his life and worked his job. Indeed, while Sarver's life and story may have proven to be of public interest, Sarver has expressly disavowed the notion that he sought to attract public attention to himself. Neither the journalist who initially told Sarver's story nor the movie that brought the story to life stole Sarver's "entire act" or otherwise exploited the economic value of any performance or persona he had worked to develop. *The state has no interest in giving Sarver an economic incentive to live his life as he otherwise would*."[32] [emphasis added]

Articulating the dissenting judge's argument in *Keller*, while conspicuously not mentioning video games, the Court cautioned against a contrary ruling.

> "In sum, *The Hurt Locker* is speech that is fully protected by the First Amendment, which *safeguards the storytellers and artists who take the raw materials of life*—including the stories of real individuals, ordinary or extraordinary—and *transform them* into art, be it articles, books, movies, or plays."[35] [emphasis added]

In that observation, of course, the Court ironically echoed the "transformative use" test that focused upon whether the likeness or persona is simply one of the "raw materials" or whether the depiction "is the very sum and substance of the work in question." The Court concluded by returning to its opening discussion that the First Amendment bars "content-based" restrictions on speech.

> "If California's right of publicity law applies in this case, it is simply a content-based speech restriction. As such, it is presumptively unconstitutional, and cannot stand unless Sarver can show a compelling state interest in preventing the defendants' speech. Because Sarver cannot do so, applying California's right of publicity in this case would violate the First Amendment."[34]

The Ninth Circuit's focus upon an "economic value" is not without precedent. It echoes those copyright fair use decisions in which courts have permitted the appropriation by commercially successful artists of works by less commercially successful artists. The most celebrated example involved the famous artist Richard Prince who had largely appropriated wholesale for his paintings photographs of the largely unknown photographer Patrick Cariou.[35] In contrast to the trial court that had ordered the destruction of Prince's unsold canvasses, the Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit held that Prince's use, in which he had modified the context of Cariou's photographs, was fair, at least in part because of the commercial value of Cariou's paintings (sold through the internationally renowned Gagosian Gallery, also a defendant) and the many "wealthy and famous" persons associated with the exhibition of those paintings.

> "Prince's work appeals to an entirely different sort of collector than Cariou's. Certain of the Canal Zone artworks *have sold for two million or more dollars*. The invitation list for a dinner that Gagosian hosted in conjunction with the opening of the Canal Zone show *included a*

The US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit finds that Patrick Cariou's copyrighted photographs that sell for relatively little are "serene and deliberately composed."



In contrast, Richard Prince's canvasses that appropriate Cariou's photographs and that sell for many millions of dollars to the "wealthy and famous" display a different aesthetic - "hectic and provocative." Thus they are "transformative" and hence privileged as fair use.



A few of Prince's canvases are not "transformative."



African American Rosa Parks is celebrated for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger

> *number of the wealthy and famous* such as the musicians Jay-Z and Beyonce Knowles, artists Damien Hirst and Jeff Koons, professional football player Tom Brady, model Gisele Bundchen, Vanity Fair editor Graydon Carter, Vogue editor Anna Wintour, authors Jonathan Franzen and Candace Bushnell, and actors Robert DeNiro, Angelina Jolie, and Brad Pitt. Prince sold eight artworks for a total of $10,480,000, and exchanged seven others for works by painter Larry Rivers and by sculptor Richard Serra. *Cariou on the other hand has not actively marketed his work or sold work for significant sums*, and nothing in the record suggests that anyone will not now purchase Cariou's work, or derivative non-transformative works (whether Cariou's own or licensed by him) as a result of the market space that Prince's work has taken up. This fair use factor therefore weighs in Prince's favor." [emphasis added]

There could be no injury to Cariou given these differing markets. Cariou had included his photographs within a book of photographs, for which Cariou had received relatively little in royalties, and had sold only a few of the photographs themselves and then, too, for relatively little. In contrast, Prince sold his canvasses through the Gagosian Gallery for millions of dollars to the "wealthy and famous."[36]

Moreover, like the movie *The Hurt Locker*, Prince's canvasses (with a few exceptions), were "transformative," appropriating Cariou's photographs so to display a "different aesthetic"—"employ new aesthetics with creative and communicative results distinct from Cariou's."

> "Where Cariou's serene and deliberately composed portraits and landscaped photographs depict the natural beauty of Rastafarians and their surrounding environs, Prince's crude and jarring works, on the other hand, are hectic and provocative…Prince's composition, presentation, scale, color palette, and media are fundamentally different and new compared to the photographs…"

Thus, acting as art critic, the Court approved the use by Prince of Cariou's copyrighted photographs as "raw material."[37] While permitting the use of another's copyrighted work—or persona—as "raw material" may advance the public interest, it is troubling that economic value is too often the deciding factor—the less such, the greater the likelihood that it's in the public interest that others may use this "raw material."

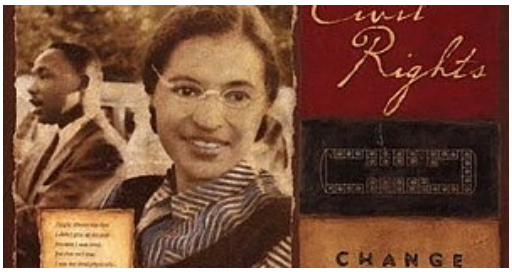
Moreover, with the dismissal as a matter of law of Sarver's primary claim, his right of publicity claim, given his failure to demonstrate an economic value, the Ninth Circuit quickly disposed of his remaining claims, notwithstanding that in the process it resolved factual issues and interpreted as movie critic the content of *The Hurt Locker*.

- Defamation—"We agree with the district court that a reasonable viewer of the film would be left with the conclusion that the character Will James was a heroic figure, albeit one struggling with certain internal conflicts."[38]
- False Light—"[W]e agree with the district court that, even if the film's portrayal of Sarver were somehow false, such depiction certainly would not 'highly offend' a reasonable person."[39]
- Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress—"Sarver has not alleged facts sufficient to show that any portrayal of him in *The Hurt Locker* was the result of 'extreme' or 'outrageous' conduct that induced severe or extreme emotional distress…Although Sarver suggests the defendants made substantial use of his identity and persona, he has not alleged facts to support the notion that any such use was somehow 'outrageous.'"[4]

when the white section of a segregated bus in 1950s Montgomery, Alabama was filled.



In 2013 the US Postal Service issued a postage stamp in Parks' honor on what would have been her 100th birthday.



In 2016 the Eleventh Circuit on First Amendment grounds dismisses the Parks Estate's right of publicity claim against Target for its unauthorized sale of a plaque honoring Parks, together with several books and a movie. Her Estate is not entitled to a royalty payment. Would the claim have succeeded if Parks had more fully "exploited the economic value [of her] persona?"

- Breach of contract, fraud and negligent misrepresentation—Having failed to argue in his opening brief any error in the trial court's dismissal of these claims, Sarver waived his appeal of their dismissal.

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Holmes, who had written about and collected art, over a century ago had famously cautioned against judges acting as art critics.[41]

> "It would be a dangerous undertaking for persons trained only to the law to constitute themselves final judges of the worth of pictorial illustrations, outside of the narrowest and most obvious limits."

In engaging in fact-finding, the Ninth Circuit became the final arbiter of the worth of the respective contributions of the director, screenwriter, and producers, on the one hand, and Sarver's persona, on the other. Moreover, in the absence of a measurable commercial value, Sarver's privacy claim, in particular, inevitably failed, his life story mere "raw material" to the movie *The Hurt Locker*.

The consequences of Sarver's defeat

For Sarver the consequence of his defeat was immediate. In its penultimate footnote the Court held that "we reject as moot Sarver's challenge to the district court's denial of his motion to stay execution and waive bond pending appeal." In other words, Sarver must pay the defendants' attorneys' fees and other costs. At the time that Sarver lost before the trial court, the trial court had assessed $187,000 in expenses. Presumably these are now substantially higher given the appeal, and Sarver will be obligated to pay these, too.

In the long term, however, the Ninth Circuit in holding against Sarver and in favor of Bigelow, Boal and the movie's producers has reaffirmed the increasingly narrow view of free speech articulated by courts. Admittedly, some courts have broadly interpreted the First Amendment. Thus, for example, in *Rosa Parks Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development v. Target* (11th Cir. 2016) the Court dismissed a right of publicity claim by Rosa Park's estate based on the presence of her name and likeness on books, a movie and a plaque.

> "The use of Rosa Parks's name and likeness in the books, movie, and plaque is necessary to chronicling and discussing the history of the Civil Rights Movement—matters quintessentially embraced and protected by Michigan's qualified privilege. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of a discussion of the Civil Rights Movement without reference to Parks and her role in it. And Michigan law does not make discussion of these topics of public concern contingent on paying a fee. As a result, all six books, the movie, and the plaque find protection in Michigan's qualified privilege protecting matters of public interest."[42]

In dismissing the publicity claim brought by Rosa Park's estate, the Court broadly interpreted the public interest and hence dismissed the estate's claim, notwithstanding the estate's commercial interest in controlling Parks' celebrated persona. Of course, too, famous, African American Rosa Parks is not a commercially important or successful figure, such as the athletes in *Keller* and *Davis*.

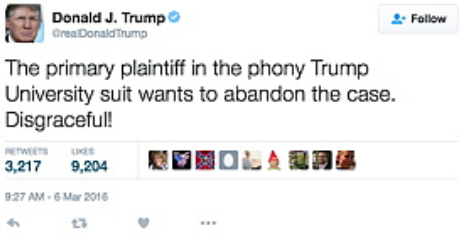
On the other hand, in dismissing Sarver's claim, the Court simply, however, disregarded the "public interest" and focused instead on Sarver's failure to show an economic interest, such as had been demonstrated by the athletes in the *Keller* and *Davis*. In summarily finding that "Sarver can[not] show a compelling state interest in preventing the defendants' speech," the Court effectively rejected a



Trump University's counterclaim in the class action lawsuit brought against it (and later Donald Trump) exemplifies how anti-SLAPP laws are "designed to discourage suits that 'masquerade as ordinary lawsuits but are brought to deter common citizens from exercising their political or legal rights or to punish them for doing so.'" Now defunct, Trump University had offered real estate seminars and other training opportunities.



Tarla Makaeff, a yoga instructor and fitness model, enrolled in and later sues Trump University in a class action alleging deceptive trade practices. Trump University counterclaims for defamation "based on the statements [about Trump University] in her letters and Internet postings."



Makaeff succeeds in dismissing the counterclaim under California's anti-SLAPP law and is awarded her legal expenses. But Makaeff withdraws as class action representative, wanting her life back and citing presidential candidate Donald Trump's public attacks on her.

non-economic argument, such as Sarvers' intangible interest as a private person to retain his privacy. That intangible interest in privacy can no less, however, represent a "public interest."

The decision is unsettling insofar as it raises but fails to answer numerous questions.

- While the war in Iraq and the disarming of IEDs are matters of public interest, why choose Sarver's private life to depict those events?
- Was Sarver's life simply the "raw material" for *The Hurt Locker* or was Sarver, through actor Jeremy Renner's portrayal of Sgt. William James, the central character—and the narrative subject matter—of the movie?
- Would the athletes in *Keller* and *Davis*, who could demonstrate economic harm, have succeeded had their stories been enacted in a movie rather than in a video game? If so, what then of the supposed need for safeguards so that storytellers and artists may take the raw materials of life?
- Does economic value—or property—adequately define free speech under the First Amendment?
- If different standards are applied in defamation cases, depending on whether the individual is a private person or a public figure,[43] should not different standards likewise be applied in cases involving the right of publicity, which is a form of individual privacy?
- Should not free speech be more expansive, not less, in the case of public figures (as opposed to private figures) depicted in expressive media, such as video games and movies?
- In simulating and exploiting the characteristics and life of a private figure, should not non-economic values be considered, such as a desire not to be depicted in a manner not of one's own choosing?

Equally important, does Sarver's lawsuit even fall within the purpose of "California's anti-SLAPP statute [that] is designed to discourage suits that 'masquerade as ordinary lawsuits but are brought to deter common citizens from exercising their political or legal rights or to punish them for doing so?'" In bringing his lawsuit, it's hard to imagine that Sarver sought to deter or punish the filmmakers from exercising their legal rights under the First Amendment. Sarver is more akin to Don Quixote tilting against the Hollywood Windmill.

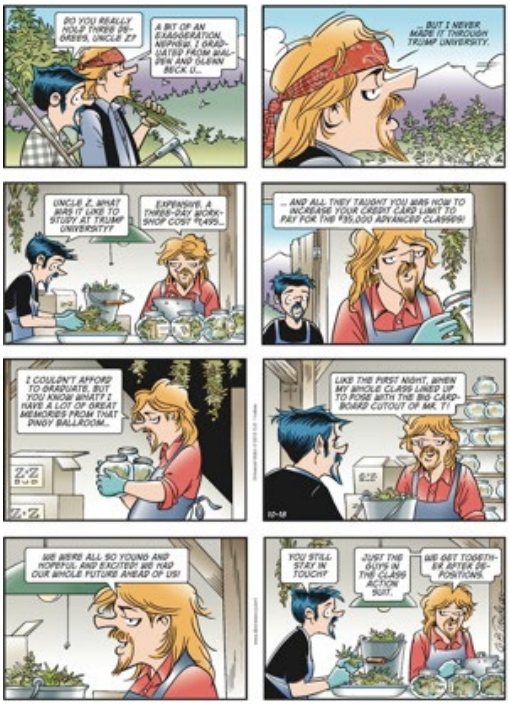
Contrast Sarver's lawsuit with the *Trump University* case. In *Trump University* the plaintiffs had alleged in their class action lawsuit that Trump University had engaged in "deceptive business practices" in promoting its real estate investing seminars. Trump University responded with a counterclaim for defamation against lead plaintiff Makaeff in which it alleged that Makaeff had defamed the University through her statements about the University in letters and Internet postings. As a result of her appeal to the Ninth Circuit, Makeaff successfully dismissed that counterclaim under California's anti-SLAPP law, resulting in an award of $790,000 in expenses. Nevertheless, in early 2016 she withdrew as class action representative. According to the trial court, she did so for the following reasons:

> "Makaeff seeks to withdraw because of the personal and professional toll that the case has taken on her, arguing that she suffered 'tremendous stress and anxiety' during the litigation of Defendants' defamation counterclaim, and that Trump's use of his 'bully pulpit' to continue to publicly criticize Makaeff has affected her work opportunities…In addition, she expresses concern that involvement with a 'high-profile trial' will exacerbate her existing health problems, take her away from family obligations, and cause her to 'miss too much





Trump also attacks US District Judge Gonzalo Curiel for his biased handling of the class action lawsuit.



work as she attempts to transition into a new career.'"[44]

An anti-SLAPP law seeks to prevent the type of bullying that Makeaff experienced. Sadly, however, the $790,000 award proved insufficient in the face of that and other bullying suffered by Makeaff.



His attacks include citing Judge Curiel's Mexican ancestry as an "inherent conflict of interest" given Trump's advocacy of the erection of a wall between Mexico and the United States.



US District Judge Curiel orders the public disclosure of selected, confidentially designated material, since Trump has made an issue of the integrity of the judicial proceedings.

That Sarver is equated with Trump University under California's anti-SLAPP law suggests that either the law needs fine-tuning or that it has been tortuously interpreted. It is difficult to imagine Sarver attacking the judges in his case in the same way that Donald Trump (a later named defendant in the *Trump University* case) has publicly excoriated the trial judge, including his ancestry, in his.[45]

Interestingly, the players' unions for the major professional sports leagues, including the NFL, apparently submitted their own brief in support of Sarver's request for a rehearing of his appeal.[46] They objected to the Ninth Circuit's view that the "right-of-publicity laws impose a content-based restriction on speech" and, as such, argued that the decision "threatens to upend the rights and expectations underlying the well-established...commercial markets for goods and services depicting athletes, celebrities and other public figures." They also, however, implicitly expressed concern about the court's reliance upon an economic interest analysis in determining whether to uphold a right of publicity claim:

> "Limiting the right of publicity to individuals motivated by a desire for fame would add a subjective component that has never before been required, and would deny publicity rights, for example, to world-class professional athletes motivated by their love for their sport or desire to compete, or Nobel-winning scientists motivated by scientific curiosity or altruism."

In other words, the Ninth Circuit's opinion might foreclose claims by public figures who had not sought to exploit—or had not yet fully developed, let alone exploited—their potential market**.** Interestingly, Sarver might have benefited from that more expansive view of the right of publicity. Given the earlier publication in *Playboy* of an article authored by Boal that focused upon Sarver's service record

Does Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury* cartoon strip violate Trump's right of publicity if a court later finds that its satire or spoof of Trump University is not funny?

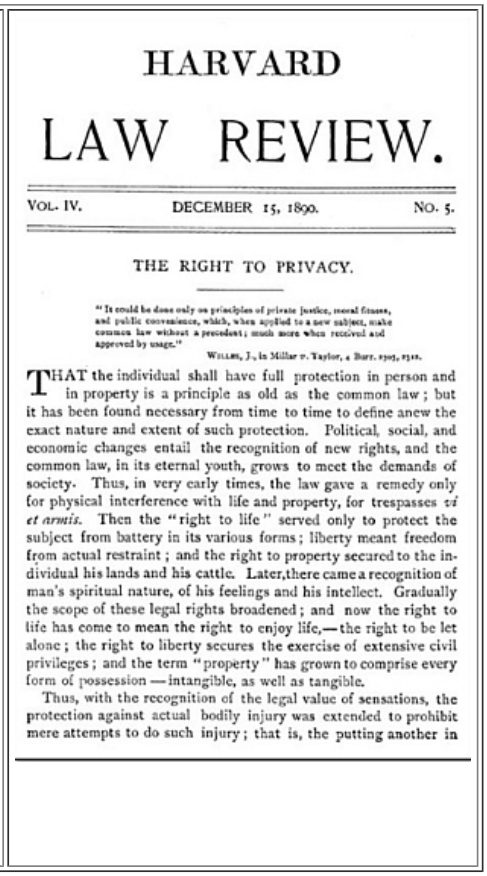
in Iraq,[47] Sarver was arguably an "involuntary public figure." Was Sarver, therefore, not entitled to benefit commercially from that notoriety?[48]

Free speech is in the public interest and a right, like copyright, expressly guaranteed under the U.S. Constitution. Yet the public interest in limiting speech in certain contexts should surely not be wholly defined by the economic interest of the person seeking to do so. Significantly, in contrast to free speech, privacy in the U.S. has only slowly developed under judicial common law[49] as well as state and federal statutory laws. Indeed, in contrast to other countries,[50] the U.S. places a lesser value on privacy than on free speech. Thus, California's right of publicity, one among the four traditional types of privacy rights under state law, [51] reflects a slowly developing public interest in protecting the individual's privacy.



While the Ninth Circuit observes that Sarver has "not exploited the economic value of any performance or persona he had worked to develop," Louis Brandeis advocated over 100 years ago for a right to privacy that encompassed a "right to be let alone."

Brandeis and Samuel Warren defined the "Right of Privacy" in their seminal article in *The Harvard Law Journal* (1890).



HARVARD

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THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY.

"It could be done only on principles of private justice, moral fitness, and public convenience, which, when applied to a new subject, make common law without a precedent; much more when received and approved by usage."

WILLES, J., in Millar v. Taylor, 4 Burr. 2303, 2312.

THAT the individual shall have full protection in person and in property is a principle as old as the common law; but it has been found necessary from time to time to define anew the exact nature and extent of such protection. Political, social, and economic changes entail the recognition of new rights, and the common law, in its eternal youth, grows to meet the demands of society. Thus, in very early times, the law gave a remedy only for physical interference with life and property, for trespasses *vi et armis*. Then the "right to life" served only to protect the subject from battery in its various forms; liberty meant freedom from actual restraint; and the right to property secured to the individual his lands and his cattle. Later, there came a recognition of man's spiritual nature, of his feelings and his intellect. Gradually the scope of these legal rights broadened; and now the right to life has come to mean the right to enjoy life,—the right to be let alone; the right to liberty secures the exercise of extensive civil privileges; and the term "property" has grown to comprise every form of possession—intangible, as well as tangible.

Thus, with the recognition of the legal value of sensations, the protection against actual bodily injury was extended to prohibit mere attempts to do such injury; that is, the putting another in

As observed by Louis Brandeis and Samuel Warren in their seminal, 1890 article that first articulated the "right of privacy," privacy no less than copyrights—or other forms of intellectual "property"—is not wholly understood as a form of "property" measurable by its economic value.

> "[I]t may now be considered settled that the protection afforded by the common law to the author of any writing is entirely independent of its pecuniary value, its intrinsic merits, or of any intention to publish the same, and, of course, also, wholly independent of the material, if any, upon which, or the mode in which, the thought or sentiment was expressed. ..."
>
> "[T]he protection afforded to thoughts, sentiments, and emotions, expressed through the medium of writing or of the arts, so far as it consists in preventing publication, is merely an instance of the enforcement of the more general right of the individual to be let alone."[52]

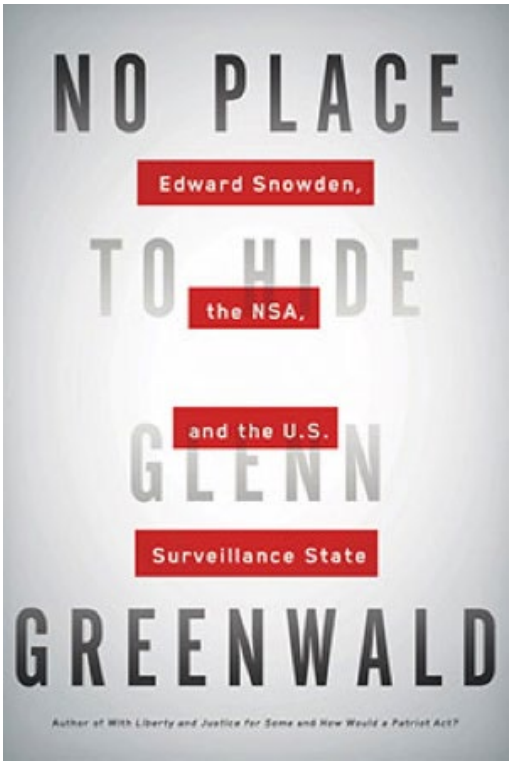


Brandeis, as US Supreme Court Justice, dissented in *Olmstead v US* (1928), arguing

against permitting government wiretapping in a case involving the unlawful sale of alcoholic beverages. He viewed the US Constitution as recognizing our "spiritual nature" and observed that not all "satisfactions of life are to be found in material things."



Justice Brandeis' view remains in the minority. As recently as 2013 Edward Snowden disclosed the NSA's vast surveillance of both US and foreign citizens.



Glen Greenwald documented how Snowden came to make his disclosures as well as analyzed those disclosures at length.

As Brandeis elaborated in his dissenting opinion as a U.S. Supreme Court Justice in *Olmstead v U.S.* (1928), in which the majority had upheld wiretapping by the police that had led to the discovery of the defendants' conspiracy to violate the U.S. prohibition on the sale of alcoholic beverages:

> "The makers of our Constitution undertook to secure conditions favorable to the pursuit of happiness. *They recognized the significance of man's spiritual nature, of his feelings and of his intellect. They knew that only a part of the pain, pleasure and satisfactions of life are to be found in material things. They sought to protect Americans in their beliefs, their thoughts, their emotions and their sensations. They conferred, as against the Government, the right to be let alone*—the most comprehensive of rights and the right most valued by civilized men. To protect that right, every unjustifiable intrusion by the Government upon the privacy of the individual, whatever the means employed, must be deemed a violation of the Fourth Amendment."[53] [emphasis added]

According to this view, the "right to be let alone" with its protection of the individual's "thoughts, sentiments and emotions" is the most fundamental of rights of a civilized society.



The NSA continues to exercise its surveillance from a sprawling headquarters in Maryland.



It also stores vast amounts of data in its recently constructed data center in Utah.



The US government criminally prosecuted political activist Aaron Swartz for his massive downloading of copyrighted academic journals. In 2013 Swartz commits suicide when the government rejects his plea bargain counteroffer.

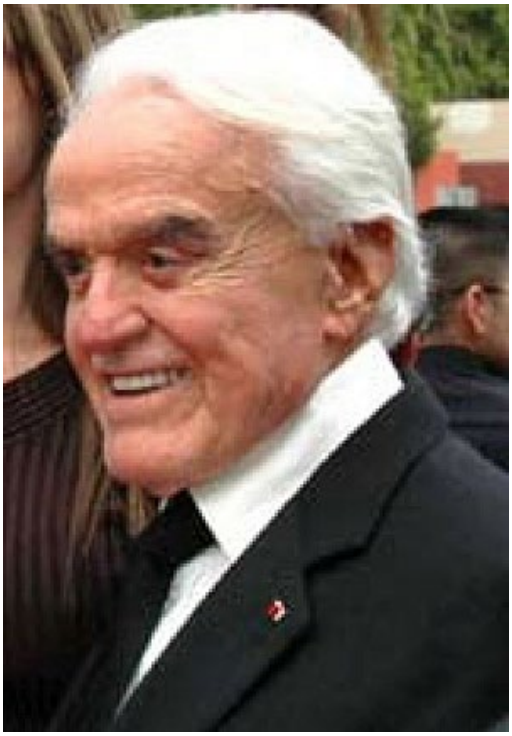


The Trans-Pacific Partnership is a "free trade agreement" that would would expand globally the US's IP protections, including "locks" for the movie industry's assets.

Today electronic surveillance is ever more intrusive—both by government and private industry. [54]. Moreover, the rights of U.S. copyright owners is ever more expansive—through both the lengthy duration of copyrights (the life of the author plus 70 years) and the sanctions, including criminalization, imposed upon those who break the electronic "locks" controlling access to digital content.[55] In that



The NSA's privacy slogan: "If you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear." The NSA and the US government have an entirely different view of privacy. Surveillance is the rule, and privacy the exception.



Jack Valenti, the president of the MPAA for nearly 40 years, represents the contemporary view of privacy and other intangible rights. He advocated decades ago for movies not as an art form but as an important asset that the US government must protect.

context, Sarver's defeat again reminds us that not all is measurable or should be defined by its economic value. The public interest often lies elsewhere.

The consequence of failing to acknowledge that interest with the resulting disillusionment was ironically well expressed by the supposedly fictional Sgt. William James in speaking to his uncomprehending, baby son.

> "You love playing with all your stuffed animals. You love your mommy, your daddy. You love your pajamas. You love everything, don't ya? Yeah. But you know what, buddy? As you get older, some of the things that you love might not seem so special anymore, you know? Like your Jack-in-a-Box. Maybe you'll realize it's just a piece of tin and a stuffed animal, but the older you get, the fewer things you really love. And by the time you get to my age, maybe it's only one or two things. With me, I think it's one."

Sheltered as a result of his many tours of duty in Iraq and only relatively recently retired from the U.S. army, Jeffrey Sarver surely now knows that in the contemporary world of adults it's the money that counts; all else is tin. It is poetically appropriate that Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* opens with the quoted observation that "the rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug" and that it ends with Sarver's doppelganger, William James, addictively returning to Iraq rather than endure the adult world symbolized by the supermarket aisle of endless cereal boxes.

Representative of that adult world and its movie industry, in particular, the MPAA would likely argue that the stories that movies tell are not to be taken seriously and hence are not part of that adult world. Audiences know that they aren't real, are merely entertainment, and count for nothing—other than, of course, the revenues resulting from their box office scores. As Jack Valenti, the MPAA's celebrated long-term president, in fact, argued years ago, movies are a "huge and valuable American asset,[56]" valuable commodities that are among the United States' most successful industries, like the endless boxes of nutritionless cereal stacked on aisle shelves, and must be protected. That is today's prevailing view. In the U.S. free speech too often sadly follows the money, and privacy is lost in the noise of the commercial marketplace.



In the movie world of *The Hurt Locker* Sgt. William James warns his baby son, "As you get older, some of the things that you love might not seem so special anymore, you know? Like your Jack-in-a-Box. Maybe you'll realize it's just a piece of tin and a stuffed animal, but the older you get, the fewer things you really love."



Bigelow and Boal in the meantime continue to recreate and commercialize history, announcing in 2016 the subject of their next movie – the 1967 Detroit race riots.

Go to Notes page



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Notes

1. *Marbury v. Madison* (1803) accessed on July 5, 2016, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/5/137/case.html.

2. *American Express v. Italian Colors Restaurant* (2013)(upholding the contract between American Express and merchants that mandated arbitration and barred class action lawsuits, notwithstanding the claim that such an agreement violated the U.S. anti-trust laws and effectively barred individual merchants from obtaining relief given the expense of non-class action arbitration), accessed July 5, 2016, http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/12pdf/12-133_19m1.pdf.

3. See, for example, *Roe v. Wade* (1973), accessed July 5, 2016, http://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/410/113.html.

4. *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010)(invalidating under the First Amendment a ban on certain corporate financial contributions to political campaigns), accessed July 5, 2016, http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/09pdf/08-205.pdf.

5. While the concept of an open marketplace of ideas can be traced back centuries to John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644), the view that the First Amendment encourages a "marketplace of ideas" originated in Justice Holmes's famous dissent in *Abrams v. United States* (1919) in which he criticized the majority's affirmance of a criminal prosecution for the violation of an amendment to the Espionage Act of 1917.

> "The ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas — that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market."

For a criticism of this concept, see, for example, Stanley Ingber, "The Marketplace Of Ideas: A Legitimizing Myth," Duke Law Journal, Vol. 1984, No. 1, accessed July 5, 2016, http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2867&context=dlj.

6. California Code of Civil Procedure, Section 425.16.

7. *Sarver v. Chartier* (9th Cir. 2016) accessed July 5, 2016, https://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2016/02/17/11-56986.pdf.

8. Fola Akinnibi, "9th Circ. Denies Rehearing In 'Hurt Locker' Ruling," Law360, April 22, 2016, accessed July 5, 2016, http://www.law360.com/articles/788135/9th-circ-denies-rehearing-in-hurt-locker-ruling.

9. Order dated May 9, 2013, accessed July 5, 2016, http://www.rightofpublicityroadmap.com/sites/rightofpublicityroadmap.com/files/pdfs/sarver_stay_pending_makaeff.pdf.

10. Order dated October 29, 2013, accessed July 5, 2016, http://www.rightofpublicityroadmap.com/sites/rightofpublicityroadmap.com/files/pdfs/sarver_stay_pending_keller.pdf.

11. See "NCAA reaches settlement in EA video game lawsuit," June 9, 2014," accessed July 5, 2016, http://www.ncaa.org/about/resources/media-center/press-releases/ncaa-reaches-settlement-ea-video-game-lawsuit.

12. See letter dated December 3, 2015, from Sarver's attorney to the Ninth Circuit's Clerk of the Court, accessed on July 5, 2016, http://www.rightofpublicityroadmap.com/sites/rightofpublicityroadmap.com/files/pdfs/voltage-sarver_-_sarver_status_letter_to_ninth_circuit.pdf and Order dated December 24, 2015, July 5, 2016, http://www.rightofpublicityroadmap.com/sites/rightofpublicityroadmap.com/files/pdfs/sarver_resubmit.pdf.

13. *Makaeff v. Trump University, LLC* (9th Cir. 2013), accessed July 5, 2016, http://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2013/04/17/11-55016.pdf

14. *Ibid.*, 21-22.

15. The U.S. Supreme Court had recognized decades ago that movies are entitled to protection under the First Amendment in *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson* (1952), accessed July 5, 2016, https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=5628256980652867975&hl=en&as_sdt=6&as_vis=1&oi=scholarr.

16. *Keller v. Electronic Arts* (9th Cir. 2013), 6-7, accessed September 16, 2016, https://www.eff.org/files/keller_v._ea_-_ninth_circuit.pdf. *Keller*, in fact, involved nine student athletes, and the extent to which EA sought to duplicate these athletes' characteristics (as well as others in this class action lawsuit) is evident in the Court's description of EA's football video game:

> "Every real football player on each team included in the game has a corresponding avatar in the game with the player's actual jersey number and virtually identical height, weight, build, skin tone, hair color, and home state. EA attempts to match any unique, highly identifiable playing behaviors by sending detailed questionnaires to team equipment managers. Additionally, EA creates realistic virtual versions of actual stadiums; populates them with the virtual athletes, coaches, cheerleaders, and fans realistically rendered by EA's graphic artists; and incorporates realistic sounds such as the crunch of the players' pads and the roar of the crowd."

17. *Ibid.*, 9.

18. *Ibid.*,10.

19. *Comedy III Productions v. Gary Saderup* (Ca. 2001), 141, accessed July 5, 2016, https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=6376074772628774470&hl=en&as_sdt=6&as_vis=1&oi=scholarr.

20. *Ibid.*, 6 and 18.

21. "The Third Circuit [applying the "transformative use" test developed by the California Supreme Court] came to the same conclusion in *Hart v. Electronic Arts, Inc.*, 717 F.3d 141 (3d Cir. 2013). In *Hart*, EA faced a materially identical challenge under New Jersey right-of-publicity law, brought by former Rutgers quarterback Ryan Hart." *Ibid.*, 19.

22. *Ibid.*, 21.

23. *Ibid.*, 30.

24. In distinguishing video games as mere entertainment and hence entitled to less protection, the Ninth Circuit echoes the U.S. Supreme Court's refusal at the turn of the twentieth century to recognize that the First Amendment protects movies. In *Mutual Film Corp. v. Industrial* (1915), 242, 243 and 244, accessed July 5, 2016, https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=7270078849202844362&hl=en&as_sdt=6&as_vis=1&oi=scholarr, when respectable society viewed movies as entertainment for the urban, often immigrant masses and a corrupting influence on the spiritual values of the dominant culture, the Court upheld local censorship of movies based on those dominant cultural values.

> "[T]hey may be used for evil, and against that possibility the statute was enacted. Their power of amusement and, it may be, education, the audiences they assemble, not of women alone nor of men alone, but together, not of adults only, but of children, make them the more insidious in corruption by a pretense of worthy purpose or if they should degenerate from worthy purpose. Indeed, we may go beyond that possibility. They take their attraction from the general interest, eager and wholesome it may be, in their subjects, but a prurient interest may be excited and appealed to. Besides, there are some things which should not have pictorial representation in public places and to all audiences." ...
>
> "They, indeed, may be mediums of thought, but so are many things. So is the theatre, the circus, and all other shows and spectacles, and their performances may be thus brought by the like reasoning under the same immunity from repression or supervision as the public press, — made the same agencies of civil liberty." ...
>
> "They are mere representations of events, of ideas and sentiments published and known, vivid, useful and entertaining no doubt, but, as we have said, capable of evil, having power for it, the greater because of their attractiveness and manner of exhibition."

25. *Ibid.*, 43.

26. *Davis v. Electronic Arts* (9th Cir. 2015), 4, accessed July 5, 2016, http://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2015/01/06/12-15737.pdf.

27. *Ibid.*, 5. Like *Keller*, *Davis* included a class action with representative plaintiffs.

28. *Keller* involved student athletes whose teams were members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), a non-profit association which regulates such athletes at colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada. Given the highly commercial nature of such "non-professional" athletics in the US, some have argued that student athletes should routinely be compensated. See, for example, Joe Nocera, "A Way to Start Paying College Athletes," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2016, accessed July 5, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/09/sports/a-way-to-start-paying-college-athletes.html. In fact, the settlement in *Keller* resulted in compensation to these athletes from the NCAA's licensing arm. Tom Farrey, "Players, game makers settle for $40M," ESPN, May 31, 2014, accessed July 5, 2016, http://espn.go.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/11010455/college-athletes-reach-40-million-settlement-ea-sports-ncaa-licensing-arm.

Moreover, in finding that the NCAA rules that bar compensation for the use of such student athletes' name and likeness are subject to US anti-trust laws, the Ninth Circuit has specifically upheld, under a "rule of reason", a trial court's mandating as an alternative to the NCAA's rule "allowing NCAA members to give scholarships up to the full cost of attendance." O'Bannon v. NCAA (9th Cir. 2015), accessed July 16, 2016, http://www.scotusblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/ncaa-op-below.pdf .

In contrast, *Davis* involved professional athletes whose teams are members of the National Football League, a for-profit trade association that regulates American football for such athletes in the US.

29. *Sarver v. Chartier* (9th Cir. 2016), 16, July 5, 2016, https://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2016/02/17/11-56986.pdf.

30. *Ibid*., 23.

31. *Ibid*., 25

32. *Ibid*., 25 and 26.

33. *Ibid*., 26.

34. *Sarver* at 26-27.

35. *Cariou v. Prince* (2nd Cir. 2013), 18, accessed July 5, 2016, https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/Cariou_v_Prince_-_2d_Cir_2013.pdf.

36. It is questionable whether the Court would have approved an unknown photographer's use of images of Prince's canvasses as "raw material," considering the substantial market value of Prince's canvasses. The Court was seemingly aware of that issue when it distinguished in *Prince* its line of cases in which the producers and copyright owners of celebrated television shows and movies had successfully prevented the publication of "complete guides", quiz books and lexicons based on those shows and movies. See, for example, *Castle Rock Entertainment v. Seinfeld* Carol Publishing (2d Cir. 1998) (trivia quiz book based on Seinfeld TV show); *Twin Peaks v. Publications International* (2d Cir. 1993) ("complete guide" to Twin Peaks TV show); *Warner Bros Entertainment v. RDR Books* (SDNY 2008)(lexicon on the *Harry Potter* series). In these cases, the Court had held that such books affected the producers' licensing market. Thus, in contrast to Prince's "transformative" canvasses, these books, according to the Court in *Prince*, merely presented "the same material but in a new form," and hence were "derivative" and infringed. Economic value frequently determines what's fair and hence in the public interest.

37. For a thorough, legal analysis of how courts have increasingly adopted a "raw material" doctrine in areas of copyright and right of publicity and a critique of that adoption, see Andrew Gilden, "Raw Materials and the Creative Process," 104 Geo. L. J. 355 (2015-2016).

38. *Sarver* at 8.

39. *Ibid*., 9.

40. *Ibid*., 29.

41. *Bleistein v. Donaldson Lithographing Company* (1903), 251, accessed July 5, 2016, https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=3277054592305773876&hl=en&as_sdt=6&as_vis=1&oi=scholarr. In that case Justice Holmes refused to deny the copyrightability of commercial posters for a

circus.

42. *Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self Development v. Target* (11th Cir. 2016), 14, accessed July 5, 2016, http://media.ca11.uscourts.gov/opinions/pub/files/201510880.pdf.

43. The differing standards in defamation cases as applied to public persons as opposed to private persons finds its origins in *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964). The U.S. Supreme Court in *Sullivan* mandated under the First Amendment a higher standard of proof, namely a showing of "actual malice," where a "public official" alleged a claim for libel against The New York Times.

44. *Makaeff v. Trump University*, Order Regarding Plaintiff Tarla Makaeff's Motion To Withdraw, March 21, 2016, 8, accessed July 5, 2016, http://www.politico.com/f/?id=00000153-9f99-d022-ad57-ffddf4d80002.

45. Reid J. Epstein, "Trump Attacks Federal Judge in Trump U Case," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2016, accessed on July 5, 2016, http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/05/27/trump-attacks-federal-judge-in-trump-u-case/. Thus, Trump told the crowd attending a rally for his presidential candidacy, "I have a judge who is a hater of Donald Trump, a hater. He's a hater. His name is Gonzalo Curiel." He also added, "What happens is the judge, who happens to be, we believe, Mexican, which is great. I think that's fine." Moreover, having advocated for the construction of a wall between the U.S. and Mexico in order prevent unlawful immigrants from entering the US, Trump later claimed that an "inherent conflict of interest" should bar Judge Curiel from hearing the case given that he was of "Mexican heritage". Scot Bixby, "Donald Trump says judge in university court case biased by 'Mexican heritage,'" *The Guardian*, July 5, 20016, accessed June 3, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jun/03/donald-trump-judge-curiel-university-case-biased-mexican?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+USA++morning+briefing+2016&utm_term=175528&subid=7931573&CMP=ema_a-morning-briefing_b-morning-briefing_c-US_d-1.

There are, of course, additional, recent and well-publicized instances where the application of the anti-SLAPP laws might also be appropriate. For example, a jury awarded Hulk Hogan a $140 million judgment against Gawker Media for publishing a video showing Hogan engaged in a sexual relationship with a friend's wife. It was only revealed, however, post-trial that investor Peter Thiel had funded the lawsuit as a means of taking revenge on and putting out of business Gawker Media for its reporting several years ago that Thiel was gay. See Katie Rogers and Danielle Ivory, "For Gawker, Legal Issues Beyond Hogan," *The New York Times*, July 5, 2016, accessed May 31, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/business/media/gawker-lawsuits.html?ref=todayspaper. Thiel's funding of that lawsuit had its intended impact upon Gawker Media. After filing for bankruptcy protection, Gawker Media shut down the site gawker.com as well as offered for sale its remaining assets. Univision eventually purchased Gawker Media's assets and has since eliminated those online postings that are the subject of litigation, accessed September 14, 2016, https://www.cnet.com/news/gawker-medias-new-owner-tries-to-wipe-the-slate-clean/.

46. "Matthew Perlman, "9th Circ. 'Hurt Locker' Ruling Could Harm Athletes: Unions," *Law 360*, March 14, 2016, accessed July 5, 2016, https://www.law360.com/articles/770918.

47. Boal had, in particular, authored and then had published in *Playboy* in 2005 an article recounting his experience as an embedded journalist in Iraq and focusing on Sarver with whom Boal was embedded. Sarver claimed that he did not consent to the publication of the article.

48. The U.S. Supreme Court in the context of a libel claim has characterized the "involuntary public figure" as "exceedingly rare." *Gertz v. Robert Welch* (1974), accessed July 5, 2016, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/418/323/case.html. An example of an "involuntary public figure" may, however, be found in *Dameron v. Washington Magazine*, Inc., (D.C. Cir. 1985), accessed July 5, 2016, https://law.resource.org/pub/us/case/reporter/F2/779/779.F2d.736.84-5082.84-5056.html, where an air traffic controller was on duty at the time of a fatal crash, a major public event. As such, he became an "involuntary public figure" for purposes of that crash and hence subject to a higher standard of proof in seeking compensation for his defamation claim.

49. Thus, for example, while identifying no right of privacy in the U.S. Constitution, the U.S. Supreme Court has upheld the rights of contraception and abortion, struck down sodomy laws and upheld a right to marriage by persons of the same sex by relying up an implied constitutional right of privacy or "liberty interest" under various constitutional guarantees, such as the right to due process. See *Griswold v Connecticut* (1965) (contraception), *Roe v. Wade* (1973) (abortion), *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) (sodomy) and *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) (same sex marriage).

50. Other countries obviously differ in their values. The EU's controversial decision on the "right to be forgotten" underscores the greater value that the EU places on individual privacy. Press Release No. 70/14, Court of Justice of the European Union, Luxembourg, May 13, 2014, accessed July 5, 2016, http://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2014-05/cp140070en.pdf.

51. William Prosser, "Privacy"*, California Law Review* (August 1960), Vol. 48, Issue 3, 389, accessed July 5, 2016, http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3157&context=californialawreview.

52. Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis, "The Right to Privacy," *The Harvard Law Review*, Vol. IV, No. (1890), 204 and 205, accessed July 5, 2016, http://faculty.uml.edu/sgallagher/Brandeisprivacy.htm.

53. https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/277/438/case.html.

54. Edward Snowden in 2013 revealed the most startling evidence of U.S. government surveillance. Laura Poitras' movie *CitizenFour* (2014) and Glen Greenwald's book *No Place to Hide* (2014) then documented those revelations. There is a veritable "cottage industry" documenting and discussing surveillance by private corporations. See, for example, Cullen Hoback's movie *Terms and Conditions May Apply* (2013) and such books as Lawrence Lessing's *Code, Version 2.0* (2006) and Theresa Peyton/Theodore Claypoole's *Privacy in the Age of Big Data* (2014)

55. Since the U.S. Copyright Act now enables copyright owners to secure exclusive rights to copyrighted material for the life of the author plus 70 years, 17 U.S. Code § 302, this means, for example, that *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the movie generally identified as the first "talkie," theoretically remains under copyright protection and its current owner retains exclusive rights to this movie for several more years. The Act also bars access to material, regardless of its copyrightability or whether it remains under copyright, through the breaking of anti-circumvention technology or "locks" – even for purposes of fair use – unless the Librarian of Congress has expressly permitted by regulation such access. 17 U.S. Code § 1201; *MDY Industries, LLC v. Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.* (9th Cir. 2010), accessed July 5, 2016, http://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2011/02/17/09-15932.pdf.

Until recently, for example, teachers in the U.S. could not copy excerpts from Blue Ray discs (as opposed to DVDs) even for purposes of showing such movie excerpts in classes on the movies themselves.

56. Jack Valenti made that argument in testifying before a U.S. Congressional Hearing in 1982 following the Ninth Circuit's decision in the "Betamax" case in which the Court had held that consumers through their use of Sony's Betamax recorder infringed the copyrights of motion picture producers. See Hearings before the Subcommittee on Courts, Civil Liberties, and the Administration of Justice of the Committee on the Judiciary House Of Representatives, Ninety-Seventh Congress Second Session, accessed July 5, 2016, http://cryptome.org/hrcw-hear.htm. The U.S. Supreme Court later reversed the Ninth Circuit's decision. However, Valenti's argument ultimately prevailed, resulting, for example, in the U.S. Digital Millennium Copyright Act ("DMCA") that includes the prohibition on anti-circumvention technology, the Office of the U.S. Intellectual Property Coordinator that acts to protect against violations of the rights of IP owners, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement ("TPP") whose copyright provisions largely track and in some instances expand upon the restrictions of the DMCA.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

"I love the smell of napalm in the morning": violence and nostalgia in the cinema of John Milius

by Alfio Leotta



John Milius



Surfing subculture played a crucial role in Milius' life and career.



"'I've been blacklisted for a large part of my career because of my politics—as surely as any writer was blacklisted back in the 1950s," claims John Milius, one of the most controversial filmmakers in the history of Hollywood cinema.[1][open endnotes in new window] Along with the likes of George Lucas, Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese, Milius was a central figure of the so called "New Hollywood," a period in U.S. film history spanning from the mid 1960s to the early 1980s, characterized by an anti-establishment, formally innovative approach to filmmaking. During this period Milius achieved international fame as the screenwriter of *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), for which he also received an Academy Award nomination, and as the director of a number of commercially successful films such as The *Wind and the Lion* (1975), *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) and *Red Dawn* (1984). More recently, Milius was credited with the creation of the HBO series *Rome* (2005-2007) and the invention of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, a controversial martial arts competition conceived for pay-per-view TV.

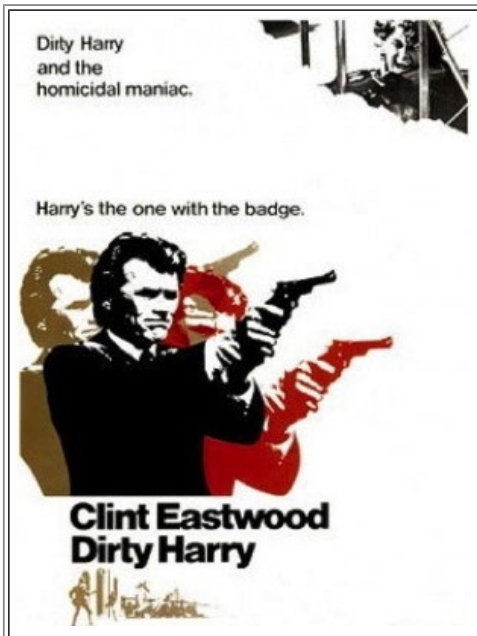
A self-proclaimed right-wing "Zen anarchist," Milius has often been associated with provocative stances on guns, U.S. imperialism and war. While there is no evidence of an alleged Hollywood blacklisting of Milius, his political leanings have often earned him the scorn of famous film critics such as Pauline Kael who frequently wrote scathing reviews of his films. Kael defined Milius as both a "bad storyteller"[2] and a representative of the industry's "fascism and amorality."[3]

Within academia very few film scholars or historians have engaged with the critical analysis of Milius' work.[4] Both scholars and critics have often overlooked the complexity of Milius' cinematic oeuvre, which is characterized by a distinctive authorial signature and a consistent set of stylistic and thematic concerns including a peculiar portrayal of hyper-masculinity and violence, the celebration of heroism and honor and a pessimistic rejection of the modern world.

This article fills a gap in the literature by analyzing the stylistic strategies deployed by Milius to articulate some of the reoccurring themes in his cinematic oeuvre, in particular the nostalgia for a lost, idyllic past and a fascination with violence and barbarism. Violence and nostalgia are common tropes of the New Hollywood movement to which Milius belonged; however, in his films they are inflected by a peculiar style and political beliefs. The article will, therefore, contribute to current debates about the representation of violence in Hollywood cinema. The auteurist study of the formal and thematic characteristics of selected Milius' films will be complemented by the examination of the ideological nature of his body of work.

At different points in his career Milius collaborated with other member of the ‘New Hollywood’ movement such as George Lucas and Steven Spielberg.

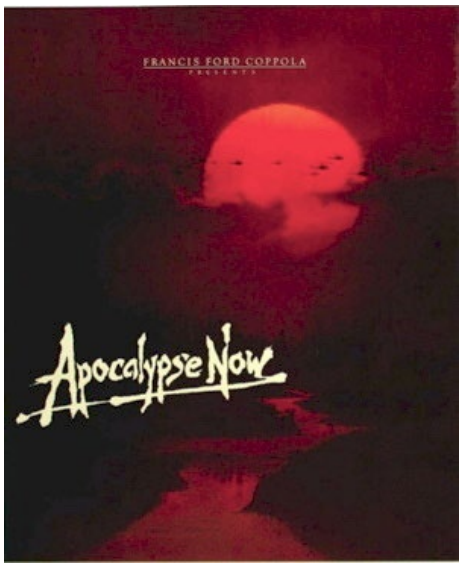
The cinema of John Milius provides a very interesting case study as it represents a useful starting point to articulate a more nuanced approach to right-wing politics in U.S. cinema, detailing the fault lines between Fascism and other forms of conservative discourse. Recently, film scholars have dedicated significant critical attention to the work of other conservative actors and filmmakers such as Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Mel Gibson. The study of the cinema of John Milius will provide a useful point of comparison to better understand politically conservative Hollywood. Furthermore, the examination of Milius’ body of work from an auteurist perspective sheds new light on the tension between personal creative vision and industrial modes of film making. To this end I will look at the way in which Milius mobilized extreme political discourses to develop a distinguishable (and marketable) authorial persona.



Milius worked as an uncredited writer on Dirty Harry for which he wrote iconic lines such as "Ask yourself one question: 'do I feel lucky?' Well, do you punk?”



Jeremiah Johnson is a quintessential Miliusian hero: a loner forced by the social and physical environment to commit brutal acts of violence.

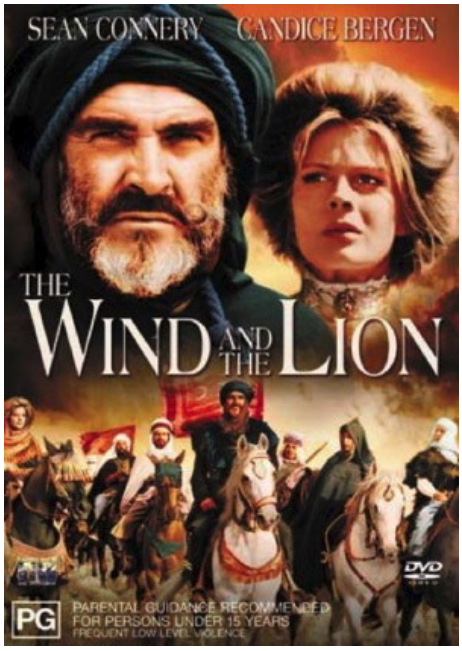


Milius achieved international fame for his

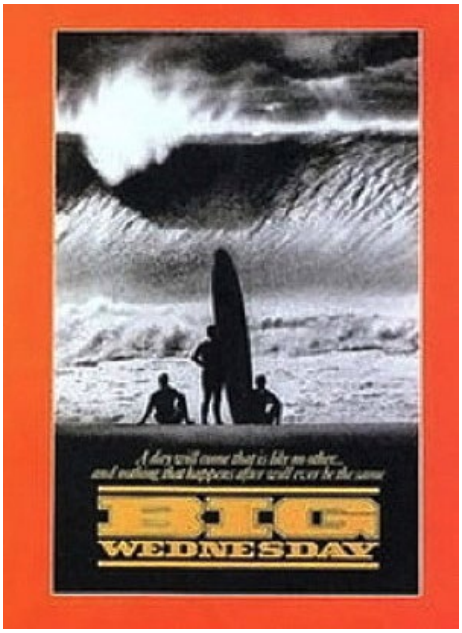


Dillinger, Milius’ first feature film.

work on *Apocalypse Now*.



For the *Wind and the Lion* Milius was able to cast a major star such as Sean Connery.



Cult surf film *Big Wednesday*.

John Milius was born in 1944 to a Jewish family in St. Louis (Missouri). When he was seven his family moved to California where Milius became an avid surfer.[5] Surfing subculture played a crucial role in the development of Milius' artistic personality, featuring prominently in some of his films, particularly *Apocalypse Now* and *Big Wednesday*. During his teenage years he moved briefly to Colorado where he became fascinated with the Rocky Mountains, which in turn served as the setting of some of his stories. Throughout his adolescence Milius developed a fascination for Japanese culture, becoming particularly interested in Japanese martial arts like Kendo and Judo.[6] During this period Milius dreamed of a military career; however, when he volunteered for Vietnam service in the late 1960s he was rejected due to chronic asthma. Milius' inability to fight in Vietnam led to a profound identity crisis and he briefly considered becoming a historian or an artist. After attending a Kurosawa retrospective in Hawaii, however, he decided to study film at the University of Southern California.

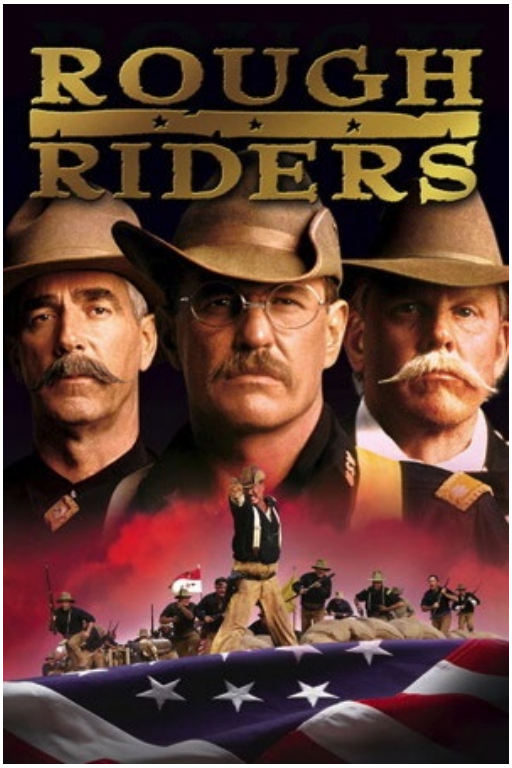




Milius reached the peak of his directorial career in the early 1980s with *Conan the Barbarian* and *Red Dawn*.

Milius was part of a group of early U.S. film graduates that also included George Lucas (USC) and Francis Ford Coppola (UCLA). These young filmmakers, who would later form the backbone of the American New Wave, often collaborated with and influenced each other. While studying at USC Milius codirected his first movie, *Marcello I'm so Bored* (1966), a short animated film edited by George Lucas. The film, a sarcastic critique of the studio system and a surreal homage to both U.S. and European cinema, was structured around a series of loosely connected vignettes.[7] This was the only animated film that Millius directed, and shortly after its release he refused a job offer to work in the animation industry.

After graduating from USC, Milius was employed by American International Pictures, a production company that specialized in low-budget action and horror films. For AIP Milius collaborated on the script for a film inspired by *The Dirty Dozen* (Aldrich, 1967), *The Devil's Eight* (Topper, 1969). Milius' major break into the industry, however, came with the sale of the script of *Jeremiah Johnson* (Pollack, 1972) to Warner Brothers. Shortly afterwards Milius also sold the screenplay of *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (Huston, 1972) and worked on drafts of both *Dirty Harry* (Siegel, 1971) and its sequel *Magnum Force* (Post, 1973). In the early 1970s Francis Ford Coppola contracted Milius to write





In the 1990s and 2000s Milius created successful TV shows and mini-series such as *Rome* and *Rough Riders*.



Milius' films often focus on legendary heroes such as Dillinger.

Apocalypse Now, which would eventually become one of the most critically acclaimed films in the history of cinema. During this period Milius also collaborated with other members of the New Hollywood movement such as Steven Spielberg, writing the famous USS Indianapolis monologue in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) and, a few years later, the script for *1941* (Spielberg, 1979)[8]

Milius' reputation as a successful screenwriter eventually led to his directorial debut with *Dillinger* (1973), a gangster film about the life and criminal exploits of notorious bank robber John Dillinger. Two years later Milius wrote and directed *The Wind and the Lion*, which blended historic facts into a fictional confrontation between Berber bandit, Er Raisuli, and U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, one of Milius' favorite heroes. The commercial success of both *Dillinger* and The *Wind and the Lion* allowed Milius to get backing for a more personal project, *Big Wednesday*, a surfing film loosely based on his own life that celebrates friendship and lost youth. *Big Wednesday* was a major disappointment at the box office but eventually found a cult audience after its theatrical release.

In the early 1980s Milius achieved his greatest commercial success with *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), a fantasy film about the adventures of the eponymous character created by R. E. Howard. The film revolves around the barbarian's quest to avenge his parents who have been massacred by a band of warriors led by evil wizard Thulsa Doom. *Conan* grossed more than $130 million at the box office launching the acting career of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the role of the muscular barbarian.

Two years later Milius directed *Red Dawn,* a popular yet controversial tale about a group of U.S. teenagers undertaking guerilla warfare to resist a communist invasion of the United States. The film outraged liberal critics and reinforced Milius' reputation as a conservative filmmaker. *Red Dawn* was followed by two films set respectively during World War II and the Vietnam War, *Farewell to the King* (1989), which explores some of the themes addressed in *Apocalypse Now*, and *The Flight of the Intruder* (1991). Both films proved to be major commercial failures and marked the decline of Milius' directorial career. From the late 1990s Milius became increasingly involved in television productions, writing and directing *Rough Riders* (1997), a mini-series about Theodore Roosevelt, and co-creating and co-producing the popular cable series *Rome* (2005-2007). In 2010 Milius had a stroke that left him unable to speak and walk. However, he allegedly recovered and in 2014 he claimed to be working on a script for a film about Genghis Khan, the legendary Mongol warrior.[9]

Milius' films often explore the values of tradition, adventure, spiritualism, honor and loyalty. His stories tend to focus on heroic, legendary figures such as John Dillinger, Er Raisuli or Conan. Milius consistently creates a mythical aura around the protagonists of his films: the surfers of *Big Wednesday* are titanic figures who seem to embody Aryan perfection. Similarly, Conan is an extraordinary individual characterized by superhuman strength. In Millius' films, characters such as the Wolverines (*Red Dawn*), Dillinger or Jeremiah Johnson become living legends whose courage, valor and strength are often explicitly acknowledged by their own enemies. The mythic resonance of Milius' heroes is emphasized by the fact that their feats are often witnessed and relayed by "mediating figures" such as journalists (*Dillinger*; *Rough Riders*; *The Wind and the Lion*), chroniclers (*Conan the Barbarian*), or external observers (*Farewell to the King*).

Milius' interest in superhuman characters played a crucial role in the emergence of the so called "hardbody film," a sub-category of the action genre which showcases hyper masculine characters (usually played by bodybuilder-actors) engaged in various feats of heroism.[10] Notable for their excessive violence and



The protagonists of *Big Wednesday* are legendary figures within their own circle of young surfers.

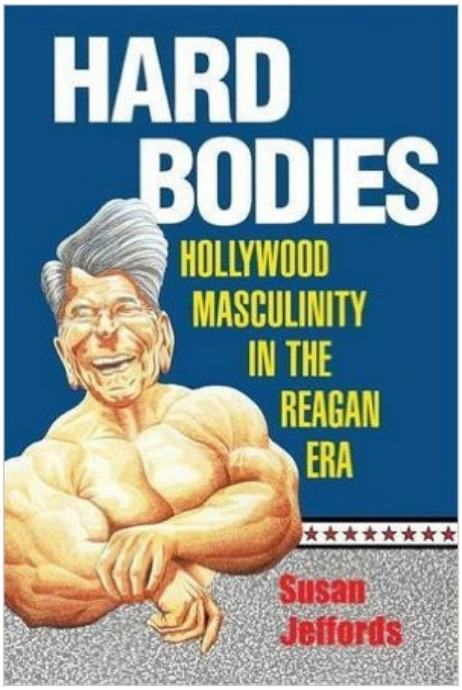
hyperbolic action sequences, hardbody films such as *Conan the Barbarian* focus on the sculpted muscularity and physical prowess of the body of the male hero. Conan, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, eventually became a prototype masculine figure in both hardbody action films and the Sword and Sorcery genre for several decades. Milius' depiction of hyper-masculinity has often been interpreted as a direct reflection of the conservative ideals of aggressive and hyper individualistic masculinity espoused by the Reagan administration during the 1980s.[11] Milius' construction of superhuman heroes, however, is also reminiscent of the ideas of traditionalist right-wing philosophers such as Julius Evola, who called for the reawakening of spiritualism and heroic ideals through war.[12]

Milius himself claimed that the main theme in his oeuvre could be defined as a sort of enthusiasm for the struggle:

> "What are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to be happy? I don't think so. I think we're supposed to put up a good fight."[13]



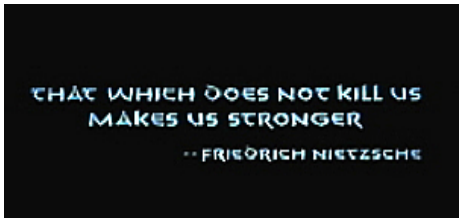
Arnold Schwarzenegger as Conan, the quintessential 'hard body' cinematic hero.



Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

Milius often follows the protagonists on an initiation journey during which they need to overcome a series of overwhelming obstacles that will deeply transform them. In some cases, these obstacles take the form of large contingents of enemies. In *Jeremiah Johnson* the eponymous character faces alone a whole tribe of Native Americans. Similarly, in *Conan*, *Red Dawn* and *Rough Riders* the protagonists are severely outnumbered, yet they eventually prevail. At times these hurdles are represented by vast natural spaces: the desert in *The Wind and the Lion*, the ocean in *Big Wednesday*, the mountains in *Red Dawn* and the jungle in both *Farewell to the King* and *Apocalypse Now*. The ethic of Milius' universe is condensed in the Nietzschian epigraph that opens *Conan the Barbarian*: "That which does not kill us, makes us stronger." Whether they are lone trappers, marine deserters or young surfers, all Milius' characters gradually acquire self-awareness of their place in the world after a cruel struggle against both nature and

society. Milius' stories revolve around the radical psychological transformations of his protagonists.



The Nietzschean epigraph that opens *Conan the Barbarian*.



Milius' heroes often must face large contingents of enemies (as in *Rough Riders*) ...



... or vast natural spaces (the mountains in *Jeremiah Johnson* or ...



... the Ocean in *Big Wednesday*).

In his analysis of the cinematic adaptation of *Conan the Barbarian*, Michele Tetro notes that Milius' interpretation of the famous barbarian is significantly different from the original version conceived by R.E. Howard.[14] While in Howard's prose Conan is a berserker who often fights in a nearly uncontrollable, trance-like fury, in Milius' cinematic version the barbarian is a more self-reflexive figure who, by the end of the film, completes a complex maturation process. The central element of the film's plot is not mere vengeance, but rather the solution of the so called "Riddle of Steel." In the final sequences of the movie, after beheading Thulsa Doom and freeing his acolytes from his evil influence, Conan reflects upon the riddle. He realizes that his father's teachings about the power of steel were misguided. It is Thulsa Doom who provides Conan with the solution: the might of steel is nothing without the will of the flesh. Conan's maturation process requires the sacrificial killing of his "anti-father." The ending of *Conan the Barbarian* is reminiscent both thematically and aesthetically of the final scene of *Apocalypse Now* in which Willard ritually sacrifices Kurtz after the latter has bequeathed the former his knowledge and theories of war, humanity and civilization.[15]



Conan as a ruthless, hyper-violent gladiator.





Ultraviolence was a common trope of the New Hollywood era and it is an essential thematic ingredient of all of Milius' films. Milius' cinema foregrounds what Richard Slotkin considers to be a common trope of U.S. culture, the myth of regeneration through violence. According to Slotkin the use of violence has been integral to the construction of a distinctly U.S. mythology. In describing the evolution of the myth of regeneration through violence, Slotkin identifies the hunter as an archetypal U.S. hero. According to Slotkin the key to understanding the myth of the hunter is the fact that it "is one of self-renewal or self-creation through acts of violence."[16] Violence is an essential step in the maturation process of Milius' heroes who often must choose between death and murder. Only when Conan is made gladiator, forced to kill people and applauded by the masses, he finds what the voice-over calls "a sense of self-worth." With the exception of *Big Wednesday*, all Milius' films feature an extensive number of battle sequences and fight scenes. In Milius' work, violence is brutal and relentless. At the time of its release, *Red Dawn* was considered the most violent film in the history of

Milius' *Red Dawn* is considered to be one of the most violent films in the history of cinema.





Milius played a crucial role in the creation of the Ultimate Fighting Championship which has often been criticised for its extreme violence.



Conan the Barbarian features several references to the cinema of Akira Kurosawa, including the fact that Conan learns his sword skills from a samurai master.

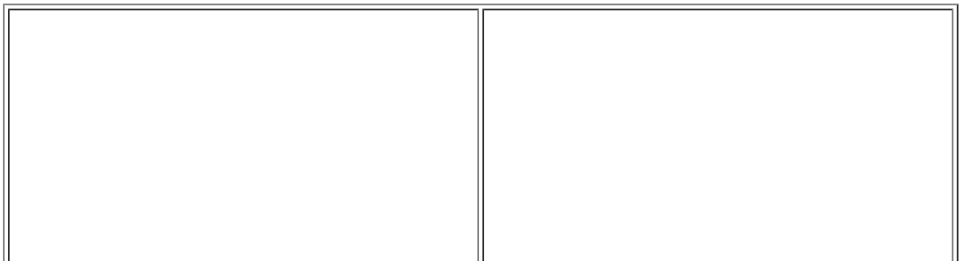
cinema by the Guinness Book of Records and The National Coalition on Television Violence, with a rate of 134 acts of violence per hour, or 2.23 per minute.[17]

The representation of violence in Milius' films is characterized by a clear stylistic approach. Milius avoids both the use of slow motion, popularized in the 1970s by directors such as Sam Peckinpah, and the depiction of gruesome, sadistic violent acts, which are the trademark of other conservative filmmakers such as Mel Gibson. In Milius' films violence is generally ubiquitous, but also quick and over soon. In battle scenes in particular, violence is impersonal and devoid of any emotional power. Occasionally, however, violence becomes much more graphic and bloody, particularly during one-on-one confrontations, as the gladiator scenes in *Conan* demonstrate. In turn, *Conan*'s gladiator scenes provided the visual blueprint for the invention of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, which has often been criticized for its extreme violence and brutality. Milius himself was a practitioner of martial arts and a student of Rorion Gracie, a Jiu Jitsu Grand Master and a co-founder of The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Milius was nominated artistic director of UFC and was responsible for developing some of the trademarks of the sport, including the idea of holding the competition inside an octagonal cage.[18] Milius' passion for gladiatorial combat continued to follow him throughout his creative career; and it was particularly apparent in the *Rome* TV series (2005), which featured several gladiatorial episodes.

Despite its brutal, barbaric nature, Milius' violence is often framed within a rough honor code:

> "I like Kurosawa violence, John Ford violence. Violence that take place within a code. I'm Japanese at heart. I live by the Kendo code of Bushido. Honor and skill. All my characters have their codes. I mean Dillinger probably had no code. He was probably just a common criminal a hood you know. And the FBI probably had no code. But in my 'Dillinger' there is a whole chivalric code of the hunter and the hunted."[19]

Milius' fight scenes are often inspired by some of his favorite films and directors. In *Conan the Barbarian*, for example, the eponymous character learns his sword skills from an Asian samurai-type master, a nod to the cinema of Kurosawa. Similarly, Conan's final battle among the burial mounds, in which the protagonist and his friend face dozens of warriors is a reference to the *Seven Samurai* (Kurosawa, 1954).[20] Sometimes, the sources of Milius' inspiration subvert his reputation as a hyper-conservative filmmaker. The opening sequences of *Conan the Barbarian* in which Thulsa Doom's army pillages and destroys Conan's village reference the beginning of *Alexander Nevsky* (Eisenstein, 1938), in which the Teutonic knights conquer and massacre the population of the city of Pskov. *Alexander Nevsky*, directed by Eisenstein during a period of strain between the USSR and Nazi Germany, celebrates Russian resistance and is usually considered to be a quintessential anti-fascist film. Eisenstein also provided a major source of inspiration for the final sequence of *Apocalypse Now* as the juxtaposition of Kurtz's murder to images of an ox being slaughtered is clearly reminiscent of a similar sequence in *Strike* (Eisenstein, 1925).







The battle of the mounds in *Conan the Barbarian* is a nod to *The Seven Samurai*.





The main source of inspiration for the villains in *Conan the Barbarian* was the portrayal of the Teutonic Knights in *Alexander Nevski*.





The final sequence of *Apocalypse Now* is clearly reminiscent of the ox slaughter in Eisenstein's *Strike*.

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Conan decapitates Thulsa Doom played by experienced African-American actor James Earl Jones.



Red Dawn manages to combine an anti-communist message with the critique of American consumerist values.

Some critics have considered the representation of violence in Milius' films as an expression of racist tendencies. In his review of *Conan the Barbarian*, for example, Roger Ebert claimed to be disturbed by the depiction of a "Nordic superman confronting a black," in which the "muscular blond" slices off the black man's head and "contemptuously [throws it] down the flight of stairs."[21] [open notes in new window] Similarly, *Red Dawn* received scathing reviews for its overt anticommunist message. Other critics have suggested, in contrast, that violence in Milius' films can be read as ideologically ambiguous. Douglas Kellner for example, suggests that while *Red Dawn* advances an anti-communist position, which specifically reproduces fears the Reagan administration constantly played on, it also celebrates the audacity of communist revolutionaries.[22] *Red Dawn* opens with a shot of a monument displaying a quote of ultra-imperialist U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt:

> "Far better is it to dare mighty things than to take rank with those poor timid spirits who know neither victory nor defeat."

While the communist invaders clearly play the role of villains, the full scale invasion of the United States shown at the beginning of the film could be interpreted as the sort of "mighty daring" that Roosevelt/Milius praise. Similarly, the heroism of the two main communist antagonists, Cuban officer Bella and Russian Special Forces Colonel Strelnikov, is presented in a sympathetic light. Colonel Bella respects the fighting spirit of the resistance fighters; even though at the end of the film he comes across the two resistance leaders, he lets them go. Likewise, Strelnikov's character is clearly inspired by Colonel Mathieu, the French paratrooper commander (and former member of the Resistance) who in the *Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1966) admires the anti-imperialist revolutionaries he was sent to crush.





Anti-colonialist film classic, *The Battle of Algiers*, was the main source of inspiration for *Red Dawn*.





The character of the communist commander, Strelnikov, is a nod to Colonel Mathieu, the leader of the French special forces in *The Battle of Algiers*.

In an interesting reversal of ideological positions, by showing the transformation of a small group of teenagers into partisan resistance fighters, Milius recuperates for the Right the figure of the heroic revolutionary freedom fighter, which played a central role in 1960s leftist mythology in the form of Che Guevara, the Viet Cong and others.[23] The ideological ambiguity of *Red Dawn* is also highlighted in Andrew Kopkind's review for *The Nation*, a popular left wing U.S. magazine. Shortly after its release Kopkind defined the film as "a celebration of people's war":

> "Milius has produced the most convincing story about popular resistance to imperial oppression since the inimitable 'Battle of Algiers'. He has only admiration for his guerilla kids, and he understands their motivations (and excuses their naiveté) far better than the hip liberal filmmakers of the 1960s counterculture."[24]

Milius' anti-communist project is undercut by the celebration of both the anti-imperialist values of the Wolverines and the imperialist might of the communists. The foregrounding of violence in Milius' films transcends the ideological allegiance of the characters and could be defined as "metapolitical." German historian and philosopher Ernst Nolte defined the "metapolitical dimension" as the set of grand ideas that transcend the mere political level and potentially cut across ideological differences.[25] Milius himself claimed that:

> "I actually like leftwing radicals. I don't like liberals. Whether you're a rightwing or a leftwing anarchist you are probably throwing the same bombs."[26]

In *Red Dawn*, both the communist invaders and the U.S. guerilla fighters commit brutal acts of violence so that the difference between the two sides becomes increasingly blurred. As the Wolverines are about to execute a prisoner of war, one teenage guerilla asks, "What's the difference between us and them?" To which the leader's only feeble response is, "We live here."

For Milius, violence is a purifying element responsible for returning mankind to its original state: barbarism. Milius thus describes the original script of *Apocalypse Now*:

> "It is about a descent to savagery, or an ascent into savagery depending on how you look at it. Kurtz has a line: 'Yes, I have descended, but I have become much greater for the descent.'"[27]



Conan discusses the meaning of life with a group of Mongol warriors.

Similarly, the most famous quote of the film, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning," uttered by Kilgore after a destructive helicopter ride, refers to the exhilarating, revitalizing effect of violence and war on soldiers' minds. Milius' heroes are either barbarians like Conan or gradually regress to savagery after a brutal confrontation with nature and their enemies. Jeremiah Johnson leaves the civilized world to become a mountain man and eventually a ruthless warrior feared and respected by the local "savages." In *Apocalypse Now* Kurtz rejects the hypocritical rules of the U.S. army to become the king of a tribe of heathens. The surfers of *Big Wednesday* are "barbarians" who do not conform to the rules of the civilized world. The UFC was conceived as a primal battle between barbarians. Milius regards savagery as an essential element of the U.S. character:

> "I tend to like the savagery. I like that about Americans: we have a tremendous energy and vitality. To disguise this or to be ashamed of it is despicable – it's denying our culture and what we really are. We seem to be a nation consumed with guilt; our movies are. I don't want to see a Western where the Indians are portrayed as peaceful people who worship the sun and birds, and the white men are the only rapists

and killers around. They were savages and we were savages; we were even more savages than they were" (Milius cited in Thompson 19). [28]

The protagonists and the antagonists of Milius' stories are both 'barbarians'. In *The Wind and the Lion* Roosevelt and Er Raisuli admire and respect each other because they both feel they don't belong to the modern, industrialized world. In *Conan* the villain's henchmen are muscular barbarians just like the protagonist. In *Red Dawn* the American Wolverines need to become mountain men and regress to a condition of semi-barbarism in order to effectively combat the communist invaders. In turn, Milius sets up the Soviet soldiers as barbaric hordes by introducing them after a black high school teacher who is lecturing on Genghis Khan is shot by the invaders.[29] Genghis Khan as a quintessential barbarian is a reoccurring figure in Milius' work. The line that summarizes Conan's aspirations in life ("to crush your enemies, to see them driven before you and to hear the lamentations of their women") was inspired by a similar quote attributed to Genghis Khan. Similarly, Conan loyal friend and fellow warrior in the movie is called Subotai like one of Genghis Khan's most trusted generals. In 2014 after his stroke Milius was reportedly working on a script for a film about Genghis Khan to be directed by hyper-conservative director Mel Gibson.[30]



Lucius Vorenus (*Rome*), one of Milius' anachronistic heroes.

Milius' fascination for barbarism is inextricably connected to a nostalgia for a lost, golden age. He often claimed that "the world I admire was dead before I was born".[31] In Milius' films civilization is often a synonym of corruption, weakness and decadence. It is by regressing into savagery that the protagonists recover traditional values of courage, loyalty and heroism. From this point of view, Milius' conception of history is influenced by conservative theories of civilization such as Spengler's views on the Decline of the West. Spengler's civilization model postulates that any civilization is a superorganism with a limited and predictable lifespan which is inevitably destined to decline.[32] Like both Spengler and the work of other U.S. conservative filmmakers such as Clint Eastwood, Milius' cinematic oeuvre is informed by a pessimism and nostalgia for a lost age of purity. Milius' stories are often set during a transitional period, the end of an era, the passing of a more innocent time to a more corrupt and complex one.



Anne Friedberg states that *nostalgia* (from Greek, nostos=a return; algos=painful) means a painful return, a longing for something far away or long ago, separated by distance and time. The etymological history of the word nostalgia demonstrates that its first usage in the late seventeenth century referred to the idea of "homesickness".[33] From this point of view, several Milius' stories are often driven by nostalgia as they revolve around the protagonists (often symbolical) attempt to return home. In *Dillinger* home is represented quite literally by the old house of the protagonist's father. In *Big Wednesday* the old steps to the beach epitomize the possibility to return to a sacred place where traditional values such as heroism, courage, loyalty and friendship are still upheld. In Milius' films the mythical place of origins may take different forms. Sometimes this idealized 'locus' is the Frontier, the physical and symbolical home of the 'authentic' American character. It is only by going back to a Frontier lifestyle that the Wolverines (in *Red Dawn*) or Jeremiah Johnson (in the eponymous film) manage to find the strength and vitality necessary to defeat their



One of the iconic sequences of *The Searchers* referenced in *Dillinger*.

enemies. In *Apocalypse Now* and *Farewell to the King*, the rejection of the modern world is counterbalanced by the nostalgia for a simpler, traditional world represented by the tribes of 'savages'.

The HBO TV series *Rome* created by Milius juxtaposes the stern morality and traditional values of the Roman Republic to the corruption and decadence that characterizes the rising Roman Empire. In the show the honorable and severe character of Lucius Vorenus embodies the nostalgia for the Republic which Milius regards as the golden age of Roman history. Milius' films frequently feature anachronistic characters such as Vorenus (*Rome*) or Er Raisuli (*The Lion and the Wind*) who are destined to disappear in the new order of things. While Milius celebrates the traditional heroic individualism of these characters, their defeat suggests that their values are inadequate to deal with modern life.

Milius' indulgence in anachronistic characters and nostalgia more broadly could be considered to be in line with his extreme right-wing beliefs. According to Hutcheon, nostalgia is fundamentally conservative in its praxis as it aims to keep things as they were.[34] However, while Milius' nostalgia is essentially anti-modern, it is also trans-ideological as it cannot be associated with a specific political position. The nostalgic celebration of friendship and the critique of a capitalist, industrial society in *Big Wednesday* could be easily read as either a left or right wing appraisal of the contemporary world. Milius' nostalgia is less political and more concerned with his personal admiration for a specific stylistic form: classical Hollywood.

Christine Sprengler claims that the narrative of classic Hollywood cinema in its most basic form is based around nostalgia. Classic Hollywood nostalgia has a narrative that typically involves a state of being which seems Edenic from the vantage of the present. Through the passage of time, this Edenic state is lost. Such loss initiates mourning, longing and attempts to retrieve or recreate the desired prelapsarian condition.[35] Milius' nostalgia can therefore be interpreted as a self-conscious nostalgia of nostalgia. Like many other exponents of the New Hollywood movement, Milius had an extensive knowledge of film history. He often explicitly acknowledged his debt towards classical Hollywood and particularly to the cinema of John Ford: "John Ford was my ultimate hero. He was it".[36] Milius was particularly obsessed with *The Searchers* (1956), one of Ford's best known films which he regularly referenced in the movies he directed. In *Dillinger*, for example, Milius reproduces the first scene of *The Searchers*. Similarly, in *The Wind and the Lion*, a soldier plays a part of the score from *The Searchers* on a harmonica.

The style and themes of Milius' cinematic oeuvre, particularly a nostalgic yearning for anti-modern purity, a celebration of physical strength, individualism and heroism, a certain fascination for violence and barbarism may be read as a reflection of hyper conservative ethic and beliefs. The close analysis of his cinematic oeuvre, however, reveals that the mobilization of certain themes in Milius' work often produces ideologically ambiguous results. As Matthew Continetti pointed out films such as *Conan the Barbarian* or *Red Dawn* are not partisan movies:

> "It is not political scenarios that attract Milius but pre-political ones. He is drawn to landscapes where there is no law, no sovereign, no state, to the desolate places where men must make their own way. His characters are renegades. They either oppose the dominant order (...)

or they exist outside it entirely."[37]



The relationships that most interest Milius are not political. His solitary protagonists enter into attachments not out of biological or ideological loyalties, but out of sentiment, memory and place. Similarly, the foregrounding of violence and nostalgia in Milius' films is not deployed to advocate for specific political positions, but rather it is 'meta-political', transcending the ideological allegiance of the characters. The celebration of heroism and violence in films such as *Red Dawn* or *Farewell to the King* is undermined by the lack of happy ending and an implicit anti-war message. In the final sequences of *Red Dawn* some of the remaining teen warriors are killed and the fate of the two protagonists, Jed and Matt, is uncertain as the narrator claims that she never saw them again. Douglas



Female characters often play an active role in Milius' films.



The character of John Milner in *American Graffiti* was inspired by John Milius.



The Cohen brothers payed homage to Milius in *The Big Lebowski* by creating the character of Walter Sobchack a neurotic, gun-toting war veteran.

Kellner suggests that *Red Dawn*'s finale portrays as an ode to death and destruction opposed to the pleasures and joys of life.[38] Col. Bella, whose love of life had led him to resign from his position when he realized that he was becoming a police official rather than a revolutionary emancipator, decides not to shoot Jed who is carrying the mutilated body of his brother Matt. In his final appearance Bella rejects violence and war by throwing his rifle down and walking away.

Despite their seeming machismo, many Milius' films revolve around strong and active female characters. *Conan the Barbarian* broke new ground in terms of the depiction of female roles in adventure movies. In the film Conan's lover, Valeria (the precursor of Xena Warrior Princess), is both the most active character and the real driving force of the narrative. In *Red Dawn* the small group of resistance fighters includes two women, Ericka and Toni. At the end of the film, the legacy of the anti-communist resistance is carried on by Ericka. The metapolitical nature of Milius' films might explain the fact that they resonate with large audiences who include both liberals and conservatives. Milius himself entertained close personal and professional relationships with liberal filmmakers such as Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas and Oliver Stone. Some of them paid homage to Milius by using him as a source of inspiration for some of their cinematic characters, for example, John Milner in *American Graffiti* (Lucas, 1973) or Walter Sobchak, the gun-toting Jew in *The Big Lebowski* (Cohen brothers, 1998).

At the stylistic level Milius' fascism is self-consciously confined to the world of fantasy and offers audiences the possibility of a 'safe' return to simplistic, adolescent understandings of violence and war. Milius himself, for example, described *Red Dawn* and its implausible premise as a comic book adventure.[39] Milius' cinema is not anchored to reality but rather to the traditions of classical studio genres. In his films Milius manipulates and radicalizes certain tropes of classical Hollywood with revolutionary, 'excessive' consequences. In this way, for example Ford's solitary, virile hero becomes hyper masculine and hyper violent. Likewise, Ford's conservatism becomes Milius' fascism.

Rather than rejecting the critics' scornful accusations of fascism, Milius often publically embraced them. This mobilization of controversial political discourses, however, has less to do with advancing specific political agendas than constructing for himself a colorful persona associated with extreme, provocative stances, what Paul Schrader defined as the 'Art of Flash': the flamboyant gesture or the deft hyperbole.[40] Milius, thus described his political beliefs:

> "I'm not a reactionary — I'm just a right-wing extremist so far beyond the Christian Identity people like that and stuff, that they can't even imagine. I'm so far beyond that I'm a Maoist. I'm an anarchist. I've always been an anarchist."[41]

Similarly, when an interviewer asked him whether he would position himself to the right of Louis XV, Milius exclaimed:

> "Louis XV my ass! Attila the Hun! Rape and plunder, plunder and rape! That's what I believe in!"[42]

Milius has consciously attempted to link his cinematic aesthetic of excess with his own excessive artistic persona to position himself as a rebel, as an outsider within Hollywood. In interviews Milius often situated himself outside the establishment by claiming that Hollywood executives had blacklisted him because of his politics. Recently, two documentaries featuring Milius—*Rated 'R': Republicans in Hollywood* (Moss, 2004) and *Milius* (Knutson and Figueroa, 2013)—suggested that conservative actors and filmmakers tend to be marginalized within contemporary Hollywood. Similar discourses are regularly articulated in *Big Hollywood*, a right-wing news website dedicated to the U.S. film industry founded







Milius consistently constructed for himself an excessive, controversial artistic persona.

by conservative journalist and entrepreneur Andrew Breitbart. While the successful careers of prominent republicans such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Clint Eastwood seem to suggest otherwise, Milius embraced his role as simultaneously enemy and victim of the system. Throughout his career Milius entertained a complex, problematic relationship with Hollywood:

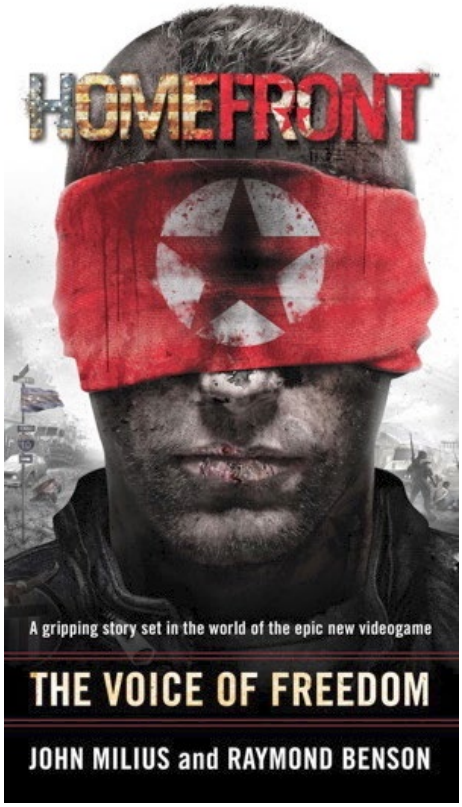
> "We were very much concerned with making the Hollywood film, not to make a lot of money, but as artists".[43]

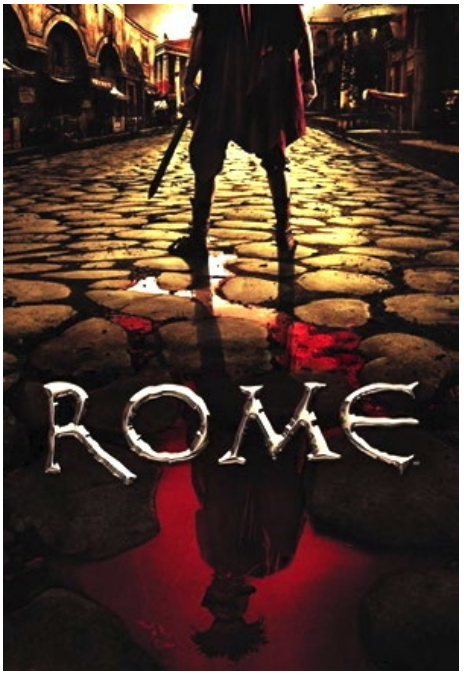
The intense conflicts between Milius and studio bureaucrats (e.g, one fight concluding with the former allegedly pointing a gun at a studio executive) have become the stuff of Hollywood legend.[44] However, colorful anecdotes aside, these tensions reflect an essential characteristic of Milius' career: a radical opposition to the Hollywood profit-driven establishment. Milius often regarded himself as one of the barbarians that populate his films: a threat to both the Hollywood system and Western Civilization more broadly.[45] Milius has proven to be an auteur with a distinctive stylistic signature and a successful screenwriter/director who has the merit of challenging the Hollywood establishment both at the thematic and aesthetic level. However, at the same time Milius has consciously used his position of outsider to build himself as a marketable brand with significant currency in the mass media system.

Scholars such as Timothy Corrigan have noted how the film industry has appropriated the notion of auteur for economic purposes by producing marketable packages that capitalize on the popularity of the director's name. According to Corrigan, the function of the auteur "has rematerialised in the eighties and nineties as a commercial performance of *the business of being an auteur*".[46] Milius is no exception to this rule. Since the 1990s his name has become a synonym of radical right-wing politics, extreme violence, and brutal machismo. From the early 2000s onwards Milius' brand has been used to market a profitable pay-per-view martial arts competition (UFC) and also TV shows, books and videogames. From this point of view, the trajectory of Milius' career seems to suggest that although he portrayed himself as a 'rebel', an enemy of the studio system, he gradually became an integral part of the very establishment he was trying to overthrow.



Milius the ‘Rebel’.





Milius as a successful commercial brand.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Loving the alien: introduction to dossier on *Under the Skin*

by Lucas Hilderbrand



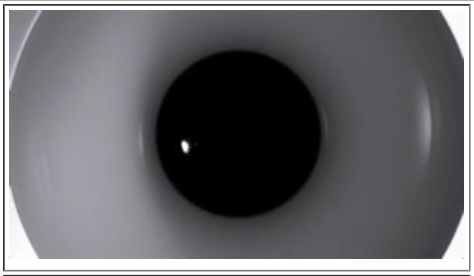
A processed subjective shot midway through *Under the* Skin, featuring mottled fragments of visual and audio stimulation, suggests the disorientation and inscrutability of non-human perception and consciousness.



As one of the film's first images, an abstract light suggests both a pulsating star and the flicker of a projector.

The five essays included in this dossier began as papers on two panels—one specifically focused on the film *Under the Skin* (Jonathan Glazer, 2013, UK) and the other on the body politics of Scarlett Johansson in her recent films—presented at the 2015 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Montreal. *Under the Skin* had generated considerable cinephilic attention and critical lauds[1] [open notes in new window] since its theatrical release almost exactly one year prior to the conference, in no small part because it is a "difficult" film. For the spectator, the film provokes such questions as, "What is going on?" and, by the film's end, "What on earth have I just seen and heard?" The pleasures of the film (though some audiences surely found the film's inexplicability to be maddening and *dis*pleasurable) are dual: the excitement of a largely new cinematic style and the attendant experience of disorientation.[2] These papers engage in the pleasures of attempting to puzzle the film out, through different lenses of analysis.

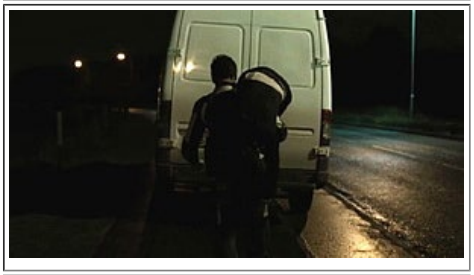
Although *Under the Skin* was adapted from a novel, the film rejects almost all of the familiar conventions of storytelling and instead offers a portrait of a woman (who turns out not to be human) whose actions are never explicitly explained. In place of narration in the traditional sense, the film offers striking visual compositions that give obscure clues as to the central character's plot, accompanied by a largely unmelodic and abrasive score; in other scenes, shot like surveillance footage, the image is low-resolution and the dialogue borders on unintelligible and irrelevant.



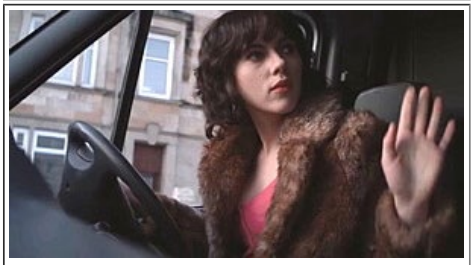
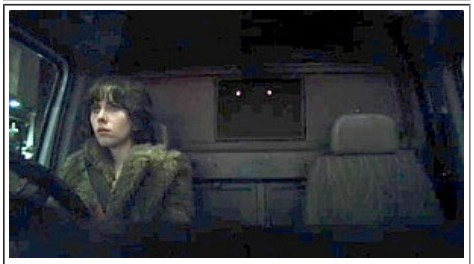
An abstract black-and-white geometric formation develops into a human eye, ...



.... reflecting the ocular-centric orientations of human perception and of the cinema.





A mysterious man who rides a motorcycle picks up an unconscious woman off the side of a road and puts her into the back of a white van.	The lead character (Scarlett Johansson) strips an unconscious woman and puts on her clothes in an abstract white space. Why or where this happens remains unexplained.
	
The film follows the lead character as she walks against the flow of pedestrians in a crowded mall, occasionally bumping against the customers. She seems	.... oblivious to the social dynamics of navigating public or personal space.Her fingers graze fur coats on a rack at the mall, as if she's learning by touch.
	
The protagonist mechanically shops for lipstick, as though adopting the conventions of femininity without particular desire or comprehension.	The protagonist drives the van, seemingly in circles, throughout Glasgow, occasionally asking directions.
	
The viewer up until this point is as lost as the protagonist, knowing less about her motivations and where she's going than she does.	The dialogue borders on incomprehensible for viewers unfamiliar with Scottish accents.
	
Continuing to drive into the night, the protagonist picks up a stranger ...	... and makes innocuous small talk with him. They flirt, and he seems cocky.

Under the Skin begins with seemingly abstract images and sounds: the formation of a human eye and pronunciation practice, which the film uneasily synchronizes as disparate elements of humanity: ocular-centrism and speech. The film transitions to a mysterious man on a motorcycle, who then picks up an unconscious woman off the side of a road and puts her into the back of a white van. The film then cuts to an abstract white space as a woman (star Scarlett



Inside an infinite black room, the protagonist performs a striptease as the stranger is enveloped into a viscous floor. He is so transfixed, he seems not to notice. She does not even look back at him. The film appears as flatly indifferent to the strangeness of this scene as the protagonist and does not explain what just happened.

Johansson) strips the unconscious woman and puts on her clothes. This woman drives the same white van in the early morning fog, the sky still dark. She goes to a bustling mall, where she buys clothes and lipstick. She drives the van, seemingly in circles, throughout Glasgow, occasionally asking directions. The viewer up until this point is as lost as the protagonist, knowing less about her motivations and where she's going than she does. The effect is often mesmerizing, putting the viewer on autopilot following her actions.

Finally, she gives a man a ride, and they make small talk. She takes him home, and she begins a striptease as he follows her inside an infinite black room. He is swallowed up into a viscous floor. Without a trace of emotion or reaction, the woman turns and picks up her clothes. Her lack of empathy is reinforced in a following sequence when she goes to the sea and watches a man who attempts to save a couple from drowning nearly drown himself; she hits him on the head with a rock after he washes ashore. It's not a mercy killing, just a killing. Nor does she appear to notice that the frigid tide has soaked her boots and jeans. She leaves the drowned couple's infant on the beach to cry and likely to die. She looks human but lacks any trace of human feeling—emotional, ethical, or sensate.



The protagonist's lack of empathy is reinforced when she goes to the sea and watches a man who attempts to save a couple from drowning nearly drown himself.



She hits him on the head with a rock after he washes ashore. It's not a mercy killing, just a killing.



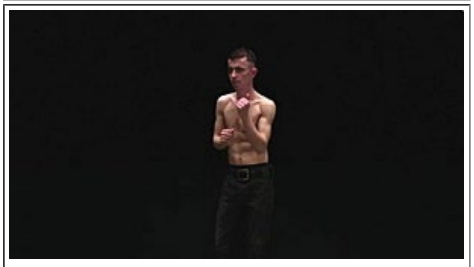
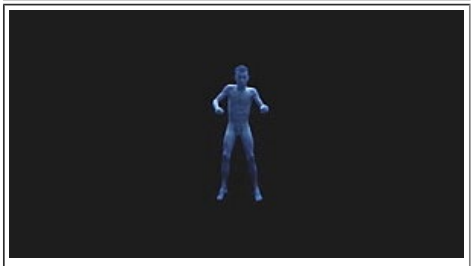
Nor does she appear to notice that the frigid tide has soaked her boots and jeans.

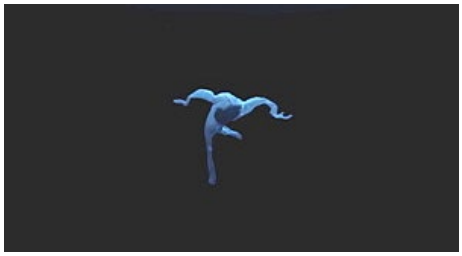


She leaves the drowned couple's infant on the beach to cry and likely to die. She looks human but lacks any trace of human feeling — emotional, ethical, or sensate.

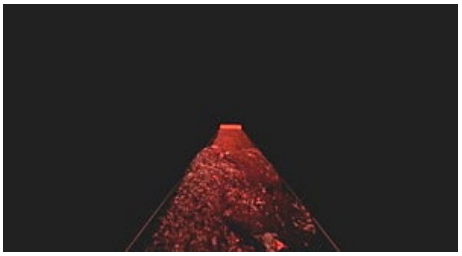
Searching for another man in her van, she gets swept up in a group of women into a discotheque. She seems to find the noise and lights unbearable and tries to escape but in the process finds the man she was stalking. He comes back to her place and again gets subsumed in the muck, but this time we follow him under the surface. He sees and touches a prior victim's body, which then pops and is reduced to a flimsy flaccid balloon of skin. A chute of bloody viscera appears and

then disappears into brilliant red abstraction. Although the woman's actions and the film's types of scenes recur enough to begin to seem familiar, they never quite make sense. The woman next picks up a man with neurofibromatosis. She does not seem to recognize his physical difference from prior men, yet, after taking him home in her seduction routine, she allows him to escape. The motorcycle man is deployed to find him.

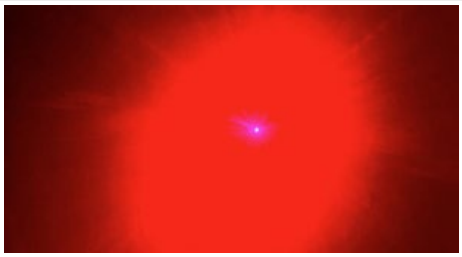
	
Again walking against the flow of traffic, the protagonist gets caught up in a crowd of women going to a discotheque. The protagonist does not appear to understand the pleasures of going out dancing with friends. Nor does she appear to have friends or any social interactions with other women.	The protagonist does not seem to enjoy or even register the disorientation of flashing lights and pounding bass on the dancefloor. She perceives differently.
	
The protagonist unexpectedly finds and dances with a man she had been stalking. He appears to be predatory in his initial advances but has no idea that he is actually the prey.	The man from the discotheque continues dancing after going home with the protagonist. He still thinks he is getting lucky.
	
Like the protagonist's previous male pick-up, the man from the discotheque is subsumed into the black floor. This time, the film shows us the view from below as he floats suspended in mysterious fluid.	The man from the discotheque sees and touches a prior victim's body, ...



.... which then pops and is reduced to a flimsy flaccid balloon of skin.



A chute of bloody viscera appears and ....



.... then disappears into brilliant red abstraction. These shots present clues as to what happens to the men the protagonist seduces without ever giving enough information for the viewer to fully understand these actions' motivation or meaning. Their formal departures from the film's scenes shot in public also locate them outside of familiar and grounding conventions of realism.



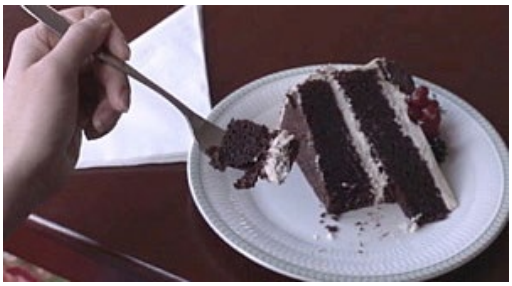
Although the protagonist's actions recur enough to begin to seem familiar, they never quite make sense. In the dark of night, the protagonist picks up a man with neurofibromatosis. She takes him home but then releases him. This rupture of her routine initiates her own escape.



The anonymous motorcycle man is deployed ....

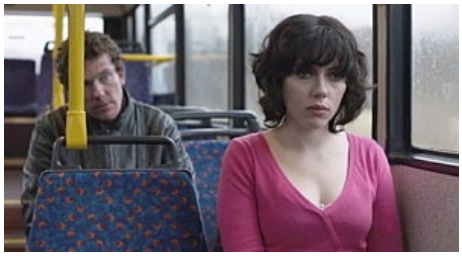


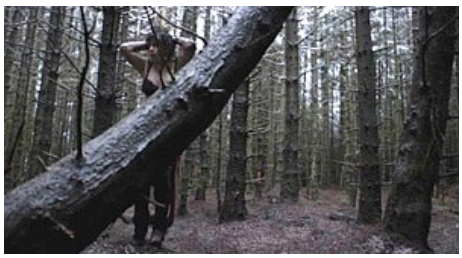
....to capture the man she released.



Attempting to experience human pleasure, the protagonist orders a piece of chocolate cake at a restaurant. She has never previously been shown eating. A point of view shot shows her left hand raising her fork with a bite of cake ever so slowly toward her; the effect makes strange the dessert and communicates her curious trepidation about tasting it. Once she takes a bite, she violently spits it out. She cannot ingest food.

The woman goes on the run, driving her van to a foggy village and then abandoning it. She attempts to eat a slice of cake but coughs it up. She takes a public bus, and a man volunteers his coat, as she is under-dressed for the weather. She goes home with him and is mesmerized by the television and by a space heater. After a date at a castle's ruins, the man attempts intercourse. Alarmed and perplexed by this violation—she rushes to investigate her genitals with a table lamp—she runs away. In the woods, she is chased down by a logging trucker who assaults and attempts to rape her. In the struggle, a rip in her back's skin reveals a patch of black; she peels off her skin like a latex body suit, revealing a non-human onyx figure underneath. The logging trucker returns, douses her with gasoline, and ignites her. She runs and collapses, burning alive in the snow. The motorcyclist looks for her as her ashes rise. Pan up, cut to black.

	
The protagonist, under-dressed for the weather, takes a public bus and meets a man who takes her home in a reversal of her previous routine.	The protagonist is mesmerized by—and simply cannot seem to fathom—a television and the wit of British comedy.
	
The protagonist is transfixed by the warmth and light emitted by a space heater.	In the red glow of the space heater, the protagonist looks at her body. This is probably also her first encounter with a full-length mirror after numerous instances of looking at her face in small mirrors that offer a fragmented view. She sees her body more holistically, and she presumably begins to see herself as human.
	
The man who has taken the protagonist home attempts intercourse, but she throws him off of her in alarm.	She investigates her genital region with a table lamp after the attempted penetration. Her body appears not to have been built for eating or for sex, nor can she comprehend either.
	
After leaving the man with whom she attempted a domestic life, the protagonist is chased down by a logging trucker who assaults and attempts to rape her in the woods.	She has become the victim rather than the perpetrator.

	
In the struggle, a rip in the protagonist's back skin reveals a patch of black.	She peels off her skin ....
	
.... like a latex body suit, ...	.... revealing a non-human onyx figure underneath
	
The logging trucker, upon seeing the protagonist is a non-human black figure, douses her body with gasoline and lights her on fire. She runs, burning alive, through the woods and into a snowy clearing where she collapses.	The motorcycle man, the protagonist's mysterious manager, looks for her as her ashes rise.

The essays in this dossier follow an arc that proceeds from close analysis in pursuit of "big" humanist questions to industrial history as a lens to understand contemporary filmmaking. In my opening contribution to this dossier, I grapple with the film's troubling chromatic metaphors of blackness as the unknowable or non-human and of whiteness as human. As unstable yet pervasive visual tropes, these colors appear to present blatantly racialized meanings in an otherwise largely inscrutable film. As I suggest, although *Under the Skin* "has primarily been understood to pose an inquiry into what it means to be human from the speculative point of view of an alien," the film's visual metaphors demand that we "see 'blackness' at the core of any rigorous thinking-through of the human."

Second, in her study of the film's explorations of human sensation, Elena Gorfinkel looks to "eating" and "fucking" as the acts that define human experience in *Under the Skin* through the alien's failure at both. Unable to ingest food or to be penetrated sexually, the alien can only know through external sensations of looking and touch—and the viewer comes closest to seeing as she does when she stares at her female form in the red glow of a space heater. Yet, ultimately unable to embody humanity, the alien dematerializes and "becomes weather." Gorfinkel queries, "What vision of sex and what modes of corporeal intractability does the film present, and what terms of phenomenological engagement do these forms demand?" She looks to speculation and speculums in pursuit of answers.

Moving from carnal embodiment to sex and gender studies, Marc Francis situates *Under the Skin* both among the films in the recent Johansson "body trilogy"—*Her* (Spike Jones, 2013), *Under the Skin*, and *Lucy* (Luc Besson, 2014)—and divergences between feminist and queer theory. Francis suggests, "Johansson's body, on the one hand, queered through abstraction, and on the other, objectified and subjugated by misogyny, offers scholars and critics a place to exercise their political desires and concerns."

Next, Amy Herzog's take on the film focuses on the alien character's actions as a form of labor without gratification or empathy, a rote repetition of procurement in which she is the bait that performs what might equally be understood as sex work or as stockyard management. Turning from the narrative to its meta-texts, Herzog shifts to reading the work of Johansson's star image, from the popular internet meme of "ScarJo Falling Down" (which appropriated a paparazzi image taken during production) to her role as celebrity spokesperson. "ScarJo, a moniker that Johansson herself loathes, is a loose signifier, a *NY Times* crossword puzzle answer, a face, a function."

Finally, in his essay, J.D. Connor argues that the film is a "a tragedy of consent" by analyzing its production practices, its funding through British and Scottish public monies, and the use of an American celebrity (Johansson) to play a British alien in Glasgow. Connor suggests that the film's guerilla filmmaking tactics employing numerous state-of-the-art GoPro cameras "duplicates" the film's human-hunting plot, "*really* trolling for *real* interactions that it can convert into a movie." Connor further traces the restructuring of state support for filmmaking in the U.K., and the ways that *Under the Skin*'s prolonged development allowed it to bridge and capitalize upon various incentives and monies—thus epitomizing the broader logics of film financing in the U.K.

Under the Skin is a rich film for analysis, and we do not exhaust the interpretive possibilities for this decidedly curious film. Rather we hope to open it up to even more ways of thinking through it. (The film's soundtrack, for instance, deserves more extensive attention than we give it here.) These essays also move away from how the film has been treated as an auteurist text, pure stylistic extravagance, or universalized allegory of humanity to consider its complex embodiments and abstractions of race, of sex, gender, and feeling, and of labor and the political economy of contemporary film production.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. The film ranked 2nd on the *Village Voice* film critics poll and 5th on both the *Sight and Sound* and *Film Comment* polls for the best films of 2014. For results, see: http://www.villagevoice.com/filmpoll/cat/film/2014, http://www.bfi.org.uk/best-films-2014, http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/20-best-films-of-2014/ [return to text]

2. In attempting to make the film more recognizable, critics have compared it to Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), Andrei Tarkovksy's *Solaris* (1972), Nicholas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), and Abbas Kiarostami's *10* (2002). I would potentially add Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) to the list.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

On the matter of blackness in *Under the Skin*

by Lucas Hilderbrand



Often framed in profile, the unnamed alien protagonist (played by Scarlett Johansson) of *Under the Skin* deflects viewers' identification and often appears amidst monochromatic color fields—usually black, sometimes white—that indicate an unreal or unknowable space. This suggests a cinematically constructed mise-en-scène rather pro-filmic reality.



Blackness itself comes to seem unreal in this film.A black figure (the protagonist's body beneath her skin, we speculate) and the black background are nearly indecipherable and confound our understanding of an already disorienting film.



Compositions using a mirror render sex symbol Johansson's face and body grotesque and

Blackness operates semantically, metaphorically, and theoretically across a number of registers:

- as color,
- as the absence of color or the combination of all colors,[1] [open notes in new page]
- as race,
- as death and the hue of mourning,
- as negativity,
- as hyper-visible and as invisible,
- as opacity or unknowability,
- as an epistemology,
- as the illicit or corrupt,
- as the immoral, villainous, or occult,
- as dinge,[2]
- as the opposite of whiteness or light,
- as the interval between film frames,
- as deep outer space, black holes, and voids,
- and as the limit of representation,
- among other potential codings.

In Jonathan Glaser's 2014 film *Under the Skin*, blackness appears as a special visual effect, outside the photo-cinematic real. At moments in this film, images of what might be described as "total blackness" appear as both abstraction and figuration, so that "blackness" might mean promiscuously and differently in its distinct iterations: as the unknowable and as the alien/non-human, respectively—though at a couple moments the figure and ground become almost indecipherable. *Blackness itself* comes to seem unreal in this film.

This film has primarily been understood to pose an inquiry into what it means to be human from the speculative point of view of an alien (played by Scarlett Johansson), and it thus presents an ontological dilemma, one explored through formalist cinematic techniques. As Frantz Fanon has influentially asserted, ontology (at least in the classic sense of continental philosophy) "does not permit us to understand the being of the black man" in part because of the ways the black man, subject to histories of slavery and colonialism (and subsequent legacies of incarceration and violence), has not been historically recognized as *human* by the white man.[3] Thus, as Fred Moten suggests, building from Fanon, black life "demands a para-ontological disruption."[4] *Under the Skin* seems so challenging and intriguing a film precisely because it ruptures our conceptions of *both* personhood *and* familiar modes of cinematic subjectivity. The film also raises certain questions: If the film itself undertakes an alien perspective, would race

distance the viewer from reading her as human or as a character with whom to identify.

still appear as an intelligible and defining framework of human difference within its logics? Is it even possible to conceive and create a film outside of an human perspective and, by extension, outside of a racializing worldview? Of course, the titular word *Skin* only serves to reinforce the epidermal readings of chromatic motifs in the film.[5]

In his astute recent book *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction*, André M. Carrington seeks to move beyond "long-standing tendencies to invoke race in metaphorical terms."[5b] Carrington calls for us to recognize the overrepresentation of whiteness of science fiction—both its creators and the bodies of its characters—and the ways that such pervasive whiteness normalizes whiteness in ways that repeatedly render black people as minorities and that reproduce alienation, even for black fans. In contrast to science fiction, Carrington advances speculative fiction as a productive set of sites for black bodies and blackness—particularly through such frameworks as Afrofuturism, surrealism, Otherhood, and haunting. Indeed, both the normalizing whiteness of science fiction and the provocative reimagining of speculative blackness appear to converge uncomfortably and perhaps incoherently in *Under the Skin*. The central character's whiteness is what allows her to pass as normatively human in the narrative; with the film's denouement, her blackness serves as a confounding rupture and effectively destabilizes what little about the film seemed familiar up until that point. Blackness in this film counters our taken-for-granted assumptions about the world and about the human.

Specifically, and despite Carrington's intervention, it's the visual metaphors of blackness that I want to think through here as they appear in the film. *Under the Skin* tests these limits, and my initial attraction to the film was that I had simply never seen anything like it. In other words, I was fascinated by its play with and refusal of conventions of cinematic narrative and representations, rather than its generic status as a science fiction art film. In spring 2014, when I was teaching my program's core visual studies graduate seminar, a number of my students from different departments and disciplines were interested in thinking through "blackness" via different frameworks—from racial and epidermal blackness to afro-pessimism and anti-blackness to the opacity and illicitness of black boxes, black ops, and black markets. The students challenged me to think through this concept more capaciously. [5c] I first saw *Under the Skin* during the same term, and my mind kept going to the film in our various discussions. On the one hand, I was interested in pushing myself to read a dynamic and continuing body of scholarship in critical race theory (particularly beyond queer of color critique scholarship,[6] with which I was more familiar).

But I was also concerned: in my associative thinking about *Under the Skin*, was I being overly literal? Was I projecting metaphor onto a literal blackness? I have also wrestled with the potentially problematic premise of looking to a film by a white Scottish director featuring a white American star to explore "blackness," and I am mindful of the dangers of appropriating radical black thought to reaffirm whiteness. This is decidedly not my objective.[7] Although this film might not be "about race," it also cannot *not* be about race. By thinking about this film through the lens of blackness, I have had to recognize and grapple with the fact that—perhaps not unlike its alien character that never fully comprehends human subjectivity—as a racially white person, I can read critical race theory and can try to live an ethics informed by it, but I can never actually *know* the *experience* of black personhood in an anti-black culture. I do not intend depoliticize theories of blackness but rather to use this film to see "blackness" at the core of any rigorous thinking-through of the human.



The film's repeated shots of Johansson framed in a mirror position the viewer to look at her fragmented form, thus alienating us from her subject position, rather than to feel her look at back at us as if looking back at herself. This

To be precise, we must also remember that this is a British text, and that "black" does not necessarily mean African American or the history of chattel slavery to the

tactic preempts our identification with her.

degree that it does in the United States. Rather, in the U.K., "black" has operated as the *other* of "*British*"—as the term for the "foreigner" or "*alien*" (emphasis added) that doesn't differentiate precise ethnicities.[8] Or, as Stuart Hall has explained,

> "the term 'black' was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain and came to provide an organizing category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions, and ethnic identities."[9]

In this conception, blackness speaks of the common experience of alienation within society: it becomes a strategic political metaphor for self-definition and communal identity. It asserts humanness through difference.[10] In U.S. critical race studies, blackness has been theorized to connote social and political death,[11] though the recent political slogan "Black Lives Matter"[12] has reclaimed the vitality and significance of African American existence and called renewed attention to the specificity of anti-black violence and persecution.

I recognize a potential contradiction in my thinking—one that exists in the film—between metaphoric and literal figurations of blackness. Ultimately, the blackness of *Under the Skin* is an alien blackness; it indicates that which is not-quite human *and* that which we cannot fathom. Through its inscrutable alien narration and promiscuous metaphors, the film enacts a project of making-strange the human.



Even when the protagonist experiences her formative "mirror stage" moment and the viewer comes close to identifying with her developing humanness, shadow and color obscure our ability to see her body as she does.

The novel from which the film was adapted is easily legible as a narrative of colonialism in which aliens inhabit the U.K. in order to exploit its natural resources: human flesh. That this colonial narrative reverses a history of British colonialism makes this science fiction book all the more compelling in its speculative future. The novel is narrated from a flatly omniscient perspective, and although the alien's (named Isserley) routine does not initially make sense, everything is eventually explained to the reader. The source novel reflects its genre: the novel is a literary form understood to express human interiority and psychological realism.

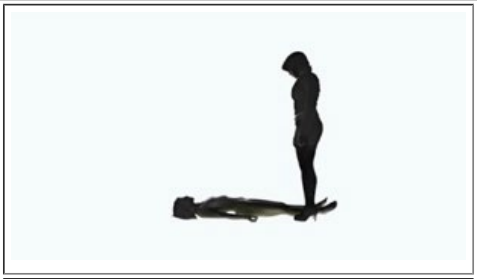
The film jettisons nearly all of the source novel's plot details, motivation, interiority, allegorical content, and even the characters' names. The film never offers explanation or accrued clarity for the alien's actions and motivations, only opacity upon which we might make projections or guesses. We never know where the plot is going, and we never really understand the alien's logic. Counter to conventional narrative cinema, this film operates through a formalist logic of disorientation: The narrative frustrates rather than offers intelligibility or character motivation. The minimal dialogue in the film is small talk, most of which is unintelligibly muffled or spoken through a thick Scottish accent. Human communication seems essentially irrelevant to the alien and does little to offer exposition or give access to character interiority.

Formally, the film presents stark distinctions between cinema verité-style shots of the human world that appear grounded in familiar realist codes and interior shots of the alien's more subjective interior environments that seem to defy representational space. The transitions between these modes of mise-en-scene create a jarring cognitive dissonance that may resemble the alien's own disorientation. It does this, seemingly, in service of a film pondering what it means to be human. But it also works to structurally frustrate identification with the film's protagonist, repeatedly keeping her a seeming other, even when we are positioned to see her stare back in the mirror. [13]

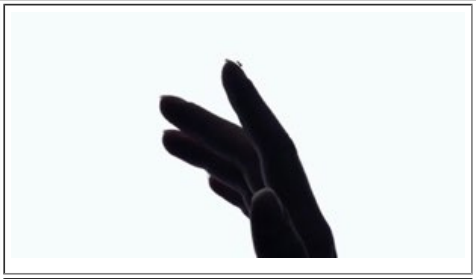
Although the novel makes the claim that we are "all the same under the skin,"[14] the film would seem to offer a *counter* claim. The film, in excising backstory,

motivation, and exposition, effectively replaces the narrative of colonialism with a visual trope of blackness. To put it more pointedly: the blackness that so vividly marks the screen is entirely an invention for this film rather than an element that has been adapted. This formal choice becomes all the more stark when we recognize its contrast to the film's spaces of whiteness: visually, in an early scene, the film places the process of taking on the accouterments of humanness in abstracted white spaces, whereas dehumanization is coded through blackness.[15]

To a take a verbal rather than visual chromatic metaphor, the Johansson alien and her male motorcycle-driving manager enact a series of "black ops" to entrap and eviscerate straight white men.[16] Early in the film, the Johansson alien strips an unconscious white human woman to steal clothes and dress herself. This sequence takes place within an abstract white space, a backlit environment that renders the image more difficult to see. The alien body appears in near silhouette, and her predatory strangeness is signaled by her fascination with an ant; the alien appears to feel more recognition with the insect than with the violated woman laid out on the floor.



Whiteness presents the mise-en-scène of taking on human appearance.



The protagonist is more interested in—perhaps empathic toward—an ant than the woman she has just violated.

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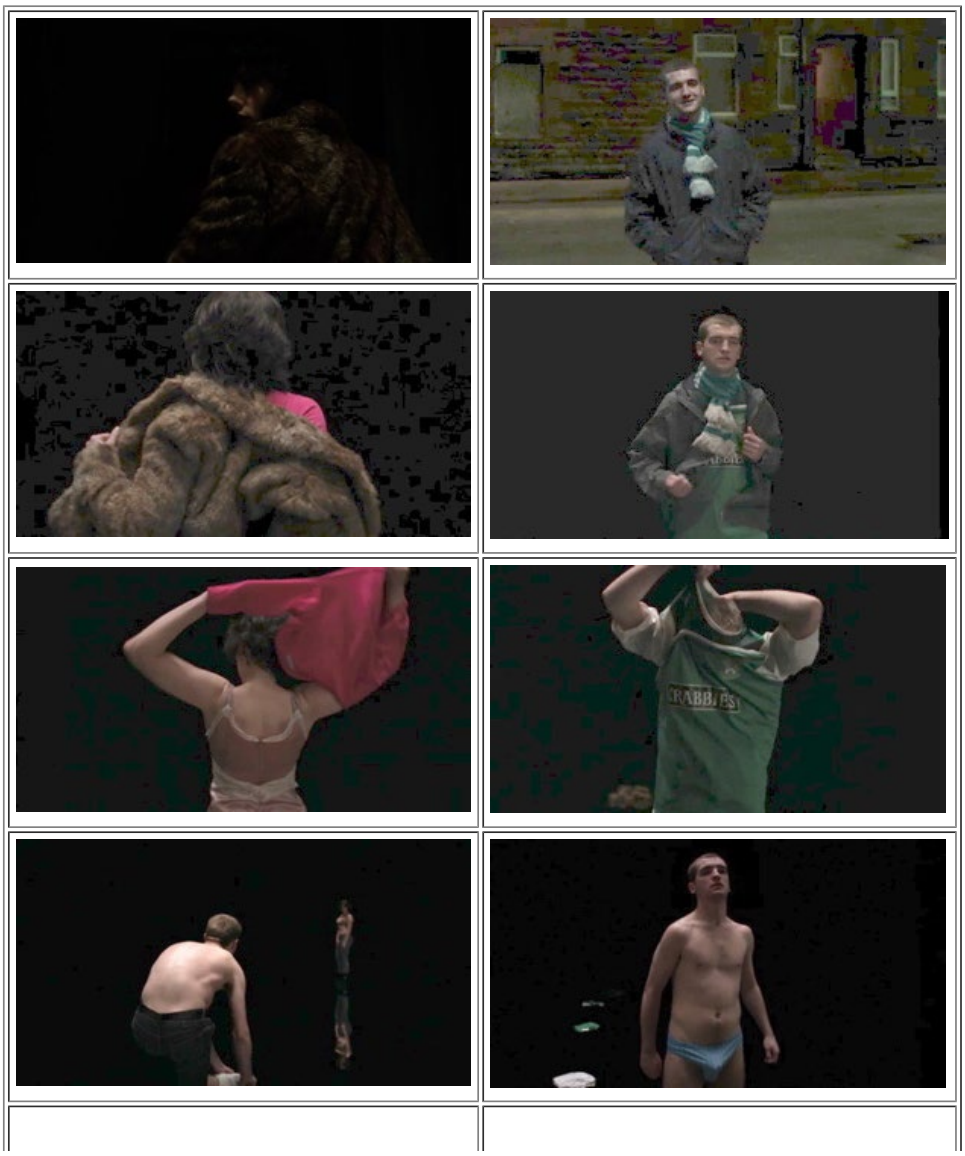
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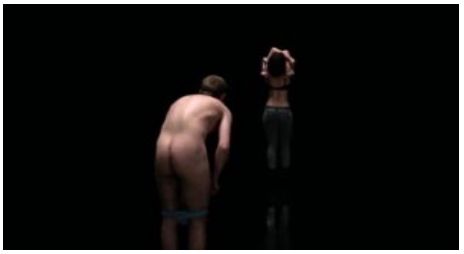
This shot juxtaposes the peculiar physics of the protagonist's house, which incorporates both recognizable space and an abstract black void.

More curiously, we repeatedly experience the character's deliberate yet inscrutable routine of seduction. After driving around and chatting single men up on the streets of Glasgow, the Johansson character lures men into an interior space that seems to defy our familiar comprehension of physical space or domestic environments. As J.D. Connor observes, the van is *white*—one that passed unmarked in the streets of Glasgow because such vehicles are ubiquitous for small businesses and tradespeople. Thus, the white van became a tool both in the alien character's passing as human within the diegesis and in Johansson's passing as a non-star during the film's production.[17]
[open notes in new window]

The first of these sequences begins by following the logics of continuity editing and, in particular, point-of-view shots, which replicate standard modes of objectifying women and position the viewer to identify with the man entering her inner sanctum. But this construction is itself a lure for the spectator—as well, arguably, as a reversal of the gender norms in which women's bodies are more exposed than men's.[18]







The protagonist entraps an unsuspecting male victim through a striptease. Presented in a shot/reverse shot editing sequence, she leads and he follows into an unfamiliar black space. Although the set-up initially seems predatory toward and exploitative of her body, the male becomes more exposed and ultimately consumed.

As the man walks forward, he is submerged into blackness. He and subsequent men do not seem to recognize what is happening to them. Johansson keeps walking until he has been fully enveloped, then blankly turns, walks forward, and redresses.



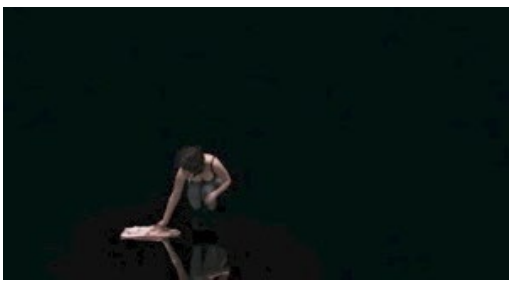


The entrapped man is absorbed into a viscous black void that neither he nor we can recognize.

When the film cuts from subjective following shots to objective wide shots, we become disoriented. The scene itself departs from the knowable world or plausible diegesis, instead presenting a black space of total abstraction where the only grounding orientation is itself disorienting. The floor acts as a mirror, and the blackness reflects Johansson's white body and the discarded clothes, thus making the image doubly visible. Mica Levi's score features slowly pulsating percussion with occasionally frenetic violins or bass groans; such unconventional, spare, and non-melodic music creates an effect of suspense, indicating that we cannot know what will happen.[19] The sequence shifts from the almost-conventional to the nonsensical. Complicating matters, we have also already seen glimpses that the house is a real space.







The protagonist continues the seduction until the man has been completely engulfed. She then turns and picks up her clothes, matter-of-factly



The black floor reflects the protagonist's body, doubling and disorienting her racial whiteness. The material substance of this improbable floor is never explained.

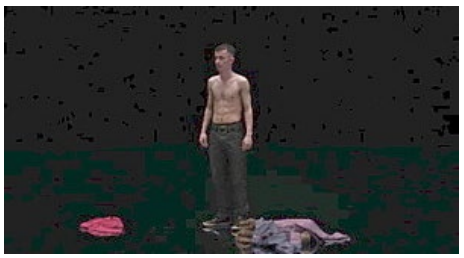
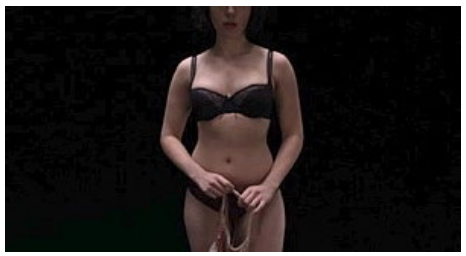
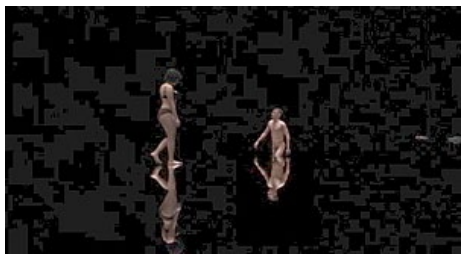


A subsequent shot reaffirms the diegetic reality of the house's interior space.

The second seduction scene begins already inside the alien's domicile. Rather than a structure of following and traveling point of view shots, as in the first seduction, this scene presents a relation of sustained eye contact: a structure of recognition and mutuality that ultimately betrays the unsuspecting man. This

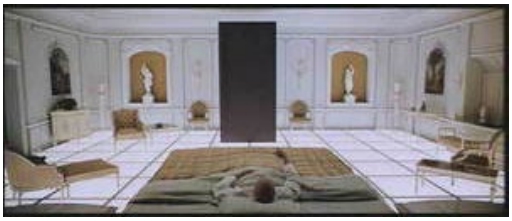
and without empathy.

time, however, the alien becomes completely inverted to our eyes as we go under the surface of the blackness, continuing our identification with the human victim rather than with the alien seductress. This is key: here we are positioned to identify with the white human male, rather than the unknowable, untouchable alien. We are alienated from any understanding or contact with her.

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<tr><td>  </td><td>During the second entrapment sequence, the characters face each other, and the man sustains intense eye contact with the protagonist even as he is enveloped in the gelatinous black floor. This betrays the pretense that power attains to the male gaze. In seeing the man look, we begin to identify with him.</td></tr>
<tr><td>  </td><td>  </td></tr>
<tr><td>  </td><td>During this second entrapment sequence, the film—and its viewers—follows the victim below the surface of the floor. Through a camera pan down to the protagonist's inverted reflection, her body becomes strange. Under the surface, we watch the man look—and look with him.</td></tr>
</table>

This black miasma makes sense to her. It is an inscrutable to us. We can't know it

except as a metaphor—or know even if it *is* a metaphor. What kind of metaphor could this be? What is this black stuff? Can we even make sense of its viscosity? At first it seems firm, like glass. Then it seems like tar, clinging to the men and drawing them down—though without the residue of stickiness. Seen from underneath, it seems like water. From above, it is opaque. From below, it is translucent, like a tinted window. It is inky yet leaves no stain. It is a blackness that at first absorbs (the human) and then glossily reflects (the alien). The fluidity of this black substance suggests that it is an *unstable* metaphor. Beyond human comprehension, it's a metaphor that only makes sense to the alien, who does not seem to notice its oddity. To reference yet another metaphor of blackness, this is like a black hole that absorbs all interpretations and meanings that we might project onto it. It is the unknowable, yet unlike the rationality of the geometric plinth in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.[20]



In Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey,* the unknown or alien was likewise metaphorically represented through blackness and buzzing sounds. However, in that film, the black plinth's rigid geometric from was key to its unnaturalness.



When the protagonist's black body is first shown, it is unclear what or whom we are seeing. Nothing in the film up to this point has made this body intelligible.

Such sequences in this film play with traditional relations of figure and ground, in that the figure appears suspended without a grounding. The site of color-coded metaphors eventually appears to shift from these non-spaces of pure whiteness or pure blackness toward figuration itself. In the third seduction scene, we momentarily see the alien's sub-dermal body as a barely visible black figure walking within the abstract black space but do not yet have an explanatory framework to recognize it. We can only question: What are we seeing here? Are we seeing her how her victims see her? Seeing her for what she really is? How she sees herself? When we repeatedly see her looking in mirrors, she appears to be mesmerized by her own unfamiliar figure. Does she experience the face looking back as a metaphor, rather than as her/a self?

In *Alien Phenomenology*, videogame scholar Ian Bogost offers a study of Object-Oriented Ontology,[21] which seeks to displace the human as the center of philosophical and theoretical inquiry. I find provocative Bogosts's claim that when objects that are alien to each other encounter each other, they can only make sense of each other through metaphor (Bogost 66-67).[22] Bogost essentially defines the alien as difference itself and suggests our fundamental inability to understand difference. He writes,

> "When we ask *what it means to be something*, we pose a question that exceeds our own grasp of being in the world." (30)
>
> "It's not just that the communications technologies of the alien escape our comprehension, but that their very idea of 'life' might not correspond with ours. … But the alien is not limited to another *person*, or even another *creature*. The alien is anything—and everything—to everything else." (34)

Building from Graham Harman, Bogost continues,

> "If we take seriously Harman's suggestion that relation takes place not just *like* metaphor but *as* metaphor, then an opportunity suggests itself: what if we deployed *metaphor itself* as a way to grasp alien objects' perceptions of one another." (67)

Blackness in *Under the Skin* could be understood through Bogost's terms as pure difference, pure metaphor. But what happens when we make metaphors out of politically charged hues, even if abstracted? Or understand human bodies as alien? Do these point to the limits of our conception of the human? Blackness has many potential metaphors, but are there limits to what can be metaphorized? Do histories of subjection at some point demand figural representation rather than abstraction?[23]

We might offer the critique that the turn toward post-humanism and toward

object-oriented ontology moves away from the human just as the humanities has come to recognize the existence of women, people of color, queers, the global South, and the intersections thereof. And certainly we have seen that the work of recognizing some human lives has yet to be done or continues to be fought on broad structural levels.

On the flip side of post-human discourses, the theories of biopolitics,[24] bare life,[25] and necropolitics[26] have foregrounded a theory of the human and of life. Yet, cultural theorist Alexander Weheliye critiques theories of biopolitics and bare life for not accounting for the ways in which racialization figures in and structures definitions of the human:[27]

> "Bare life and biopolitics discourse not only misconstrues how profoundly race and racism shape the modern idea of the human, it also overlooks or perfunctorily writes off theorizations of race, subjection, and humanity found in black and ethnic studies, allowing bare life and biopolitics discourse to imagine an indivisible biological substance anterior to racialization. The idea of racialized assemblages, in contrast, construes race not as biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans." (4)

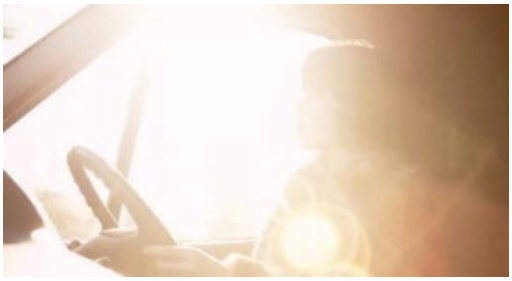


The alien protagonist's escape into attempting a human life is visually marked by a scene in which her body becomes obscured by a thick white fog.

Part of what may be unsettling about *Under the Skin* is that it reduces straight white male bodies to meat.

At a key transitional moment in the film's arc, after the alien has made her first empathic action by releasing a man and deviating from her routine, she becomes formally almost totally obscured in a milky fog. As she transitions to attempting a human life, her image is almost totally subsumed into *whiteness*. Just as the early groundless space of whiteness renders bodies under-illuminated, this cloud obfuscates. Whiteness, in this film, *blinds* or *masks*.

Following this transition, when the alien attempts to experience a human life, she becomes involved a domesticated heterosexual romance, which begs the question: is humanity understood as necessarily heterosexual in this film? And is humanity



Light and whiteness have a peculiarly blinding effect in scenes throughout the film.

always subject to gendered and sexualized violence? In the film's final act, the narrative presents a reversal in which the alien, who had been a predator, becomes the preyed upon. We might read this third act to suggest that to be human is to be vulnerable.

Yet, the revelation of a not-human black female body when Johansson's skin is peeled away offers the ultimate confirmation of her alienness,[28] and it provokes the escalation of a hate crime. To put it even more pointedly: the revelation of a black female body becomes the ultimate and absolute evidence of the character's non-humanity. In turning her excised face back toward herself, this moment presents the only instance—after numerous scenes of self-looking—when we witness the protagonist see herself as she is. Immediately her aggressor douses her body with gasoline and lights her aflame, as if to suggest not only that she seems unreal but also that she *must not exist*. This sequence marks both when other characters finally fail to recognize her as human within the narrative and, conversely, might be understood as precisely the instant when she comes to figure as a grievable life for the viewer.[29] The man's xenophobic violence potentially undoes the humanitarian sympathy one might have felt toward the alien's prior male victims and any related antipathy toward her.



After a sexual assault tears the protagonist's skin, she peels her hide away to reveal an alien black figure underneath.



The revelation of a black body becomes the ultimate and absolute evidence of the character's non-humanity.



In turning her excised face back toward herself, this moment presents the only instance—after numerous scenes of self-looking—when we witness the protagonist see herself as she is.



The protagonist's aggressor douses her body with gasoline and lights her aflame, as if to suggest not only that she seems unreal but also that she must not exist. A burning body, rendered unrecognizable, runs through the woods and then collapses in the snow.

The embodiment of blackness is so blatant in this film that it becomes difficult to understand the metaphor in any way other than as racialized, the embodiment of difference. That the blackness of the alien's subdermal body appears chromatically *blacker* than any actual human skin tone might suggest its metaphoric rather than racialized intended meaning; as noted above, however, Hall reminds us that the identity "black" has always operated as a construction giving unity and expression to a diverse range of ethnic and racial positions rather than as a literal referent to a singular or specific skin color. Furthermore, as Weheliye states, all figurations of the human are "subject to racialization" (8), so for this to be a film to be about being human, it must also be about being raced.



We might also consider that this film presents a narrative of passing: Scarlett Johansson's character is an alien who passes for human, and, in this film, passing for human apparently means passing as white. Yet, throughout the film, whiteness renders less visible, as though to suggest—unconsciously or not—that whiteness itself must be demystified. In the film's final shots, the falling snow looks like ash, a disorienting doubling of white and black (and of cold and hot, of falling and rising), as the alien's body burns amidst the winter landscape; to the camera's lens, the white snow becomes shadows in contrast to the overcast sky.

How do we make sense of the color-coded meanings and obfuscations in *Under*

In the film's final shots, the falling snow looks like ash, a disorienting doubling of white and black (and of cold and hot, of falling and rising), as the alien's body burns amidst the winter landscape. To the camera's lens, the white snow becomes shadows in contrast to the overcast sky.

the Skin? Does this film reiterate overdetermined iconography that codes blackness as less-than-human? Or is it negotiating a different, deracialized set of meanings and metaphors for alienation more broadly conceived? The film's refusal to explain itself—to offer the kinds of interiority or narrative intelligibility ultimately offered in the novel—creates a structure that both stokes and frustrates the search for a coherent politics, or even for figuration. Rather than necessarily condemn this move, I argue that the film fascinatingly, uncomfortably reveals the contradictions and limitations in our concepts of the human, the relational, and the other.[30]

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

Acknowledgments: Thank you to my students for first challenging me to think through some of these questions, especially Anirban Gupta Nigam, Parisa Vaziri, Rashad Evans, and Graham Eng-Wilmot; to my co-panelists Elena Gorfinkel, Amy Herzog, and Homay King for our initial conversations; to Alessandra Raengo for a productive dialogue and for sharing her forthcoming work; and to Marc Francis and J.D. Connor for joining this dossier.

1. Despite its varied cultural meanings and aesthetic uses, in color theory black is not considered an actual color. Eugene Thacker writes, “Black objects are those that do not reflect light in the visible spectrum; thus colour theory refers to black as ‘non-chromatic’ or ‘achromatic.’” Thacker, “Black on Black,” *Mute,* 17 July 2013.

Yet, as film theorist Alessandra Raengo has suggested, there can be no image without black. Raengo “Black Matters,” Alessandra Raengo, "Black Matters," special section "Is the Moving Image an Object?" ed. Brian Price and Raengo, *Discourse* vol. 38, no. 2 (forthcoming, Spring 2016). Raengo spearheads the Liquid Blackness project at Georgia State University. [return to text]

2. In addition to suggesting dirtiness and its racist connotations, “dinge queen” is also a slang term for a white gay man who is attracted to black men. See Robert Reid-Pharr, “Dinge,” in *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 85-98.

3. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks,* trans. Charles Lam Markman (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 110.

4. In this formulation, as black life exists outside of conventional philosophies of human ontology, it is beside or beyond it—para-ontology. Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness,” *Criticism* 50, no 2 (winter 2008): 179. Moten writes,

> “lived experiences of blackness … are, on the one hand, aligned with what has been called radical and, on the other hand, aligned not so much with a kind of being-toward-death but with something that has been understood as deathly or death-driven nonbeing. This strife between normativity and the destruction of norms is essential….” (177-78).

Moten goes on to examine “chromatic saturation” by revisiting a 1967 artists’ debate on the color black (188-205).

5. After surveying the major reviews of the film, it appears that the racial connotations of the film have largely been unexplored. In the United States, although we are often fixated and entrenched on questions of race, we are often reluctant to actually think through the complexities of race and how it operates. Although not quite offering racialized readings, some reviews implicitly suggest the use of blackness to connote non-humanity.

[Romney, "Film of the Week: *Under the Skin*," *Film Comment* blog, April 3, 2014, http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/under-the-skin-jonathan-glazer-review/]. Jonathan Romney writes,

> "Some scenes take place against pure white or black backgrounds, in places or non-places that we can't easily identify, but which are just irreducibly *other*. What happens there to human bodies—how they react physically and, just as importantly, how those reactions *sound* —makes for one of the most unnerving and hallucinatory images in recent cinema."

[Sharkley, "Scarlett Johansson Mesermerizes While Getting 'Under the Skin'," *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2014, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/moviesnow/la-et-mn-under-the-skin-20140404-story.html.] Betsey Sharkely remarks upon the counter-evolutionary connotations of blackness,

> "The specifics of our world fade to undefined blackness, clothes fall away as do fears as the men follow her, everything slowing. It evokes a museum diorama of early man emerging from the muck, in reverse."

Generally, however, reviews of the film primarily invoked the word "black" only as an adjective without further analytical inquiry into the color's meaning. See, for instance,

- Scott Foundas, *"Under the Skin"*(Telluride Film Festival review), *Variety,* August 30, 2013, http://variety.com/2013/film/global/under-the-skin-review-telluride-venice-toronto-1200593111/;
- Todd McCarthy, "*Under the Skin*" (review), *The Hollywood Reporter,* September 12, 2013, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/under-skin-film-review-627838;
- Nicolas Rapold, "Lovely, Lethal and Out of This World," *New York Times,* March 28, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/30/movies/scarlett-johansson-falls-to-earth-in-under-the-skin.html;
- Stephen Holden, "A Much Darker Hitchhiker's Guide," *New York Times*, April 3, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/04/movies/scarlett-johansson-as-a-deadly-alien-in-under-the-skin.html;
- Stephanie Zacharek, "*Under the Skin* is Alluring, Creepy, and Great," *Village Voice,* April 2, 2014, http://www.villagevoice.com/film/under-the-skin-is-alluring-creepy-and-great-6441489;
- Dave Calhoun, "Under the Skin" (review), *Time Out New York,* April 1, 2014, http://www.timeout.com/us/film/under-the-skin;
- Samuel Wigley, "*Under the Skin*" (review), *Sight and Sound*, April 2014, http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/film-week-under-skin.

5b. Andre M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 3.

5c. Anirban Gupta-Nigam's final paper was revised and published as "Black Infrastructures: Media and the Trap of Visibility," *Media Fields Journal* 11 (2016): http://mediafieldsjournal.squarespace.com/black-infrastructure/.

6. For foundational works in the Queer of Color Critique, see

- José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999);
- Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004);

- David L. Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Estéban Muñoz, eds. "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" special issue, *Social Text* 84-85 (2005).

7. In part, this might mirror Darby English's move to think through black artists' creative practice beyond the limiting frameworks of their racial identities and contexts but to look beyond metaphors of race in their work and to, following Richard Dyer, understand that whiteness also operates as racial metaphor. See Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007) and Richard Dyer, *White*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

8. Houston A. Baker, Jr., Steven Best, and Ruth H. Lindeborg, "Introduction: Representing Blackness/Representing Britain: Cultural Studies and the Politics of Knowledge," *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, eds. Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Lindeborg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 5. Stuart Hall suggests that as an immigrant from Jamaica, he only learned to identify as "black" in England. "Minimal Selves," *BBCS,* 116. He writes that black "has always been an unstable identity, psychically, culturally, and politically." (116)

9. Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," *BBCS,* 163. Hall continues,

> "What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences, and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature." (166)

10. I'm less able to speak to the specificity of this as a *Scottish* film, but it presents the people of Glasgow to be homogenously (if inaccurately) white. The Johansson alien, in contrast, is vocally marked as an outsider by performing a British accent, rather than a Scottish one, and she appears pointedly indifferent to a news radio report on a Scottish referendum for independence.

11. For a review of these discourses, see Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions* 5 (2011). http://www.yorku.ca/intent/issue5/articles/jaredsexton.php

12. Black Lives Matter, also known as #blacklivesmatter, is a social movement based in the United States that arose in response to a wave of (mostly police) killings of unarmed African-American citizens across the country, after which citizens or police were typically unpunished through lack of indictment or conviction. The ideological message of this racialized violence was that it was "legal" for police to kill black citizens, and that black people were treated as disposable or less-than-human by the state. Black Lives Matter was originally coined in response to the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman (in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin); the term gained traction and national visibility as a campaign in 2014 in response to the police killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Eric Garner in New York, NY, among other deaths. *Under the Skin* debuted at film festivals shortly after the Zimmerman acquittal and was released in early 2014, prior to the broad adoption of the phrase Black Lives Matter.

13. At one point in the film, the alien is swept up in a crowd of women going to a discotheque, and she cannot understand the visceral pleasures of strobe lights and house beats; rather than experience ecstasy, she seeks to escape. In moments when human characters experience their own ecstatic embodiment—such as amidst the strobes and colored lights of a discotheque—or when they experience sensory overload—such as blinding sun—our alien protagonist is unphased.

14. Michel Faber, *Under the Skin* (San Diego: Harcourt, 2000): 163 and 176.

15. The color red—via lipstick, blood, and warmth—connotes carnal pleasures and sustenance in this film. See Elena Gorfinkel's reading of the film in this dossier, "Sex, Sensation and Nonhuman Interiority in *Under the Skin*."

16. See Amy Herzog's reading of the character's routine in terms of alienated labor in this dossier, "Star Vehicle: Labor, Alienation, and the Surface-Level Pleasures of *Under the Skin*."

17. See J.D. Connor's essay in this dossier, "Independence and the Consent of the Governed: The Systems and Scales of *Under the Skin*". [return to page 2]

18. The obvious reference here is Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:3 (autumn 1975): 6-18, and widely reprinted.

19. Only later, when the alien experiments with a romantic human relationship, does the score even flirt with familiar movie score sounds; that cue is titled "Love" on the soundtrack album.

20. Responding to a deep sense of alienation from U.S. society, a number of black musicians, writers, and artists—including Afrika Bambaataa, Sun Ra, Parliament, Octavia Butler, Samuel L. Delany, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and others—turned to fantasy, science fiction, and outer space to imagine a different world and consciousness during the 1970s and 1980s. For populations that had been denied their histories and that continued to be structurally oppressed in the present, imagining futures were radical acts. This utopian project has come to be called Afrofuturism. Although there are parallels between that movement and this film, I do not see *Under the Skin* as part of that discourse; in fact, it may be its inverse.

21. Whereas human existence and consciousness have been the primary concerns of philosophy, Object-Oriented Ontology shifts focus to the existential status of non-sentient things. In effect, this poses a turn from thinking in terms of human subjectivity to thinking of humans as just one kind of object among various objects in the world.

22. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

23. Thanks to Alessandra Raengo for raising the question of the limits of metaphor during the Q&A when I presented the first iteration of this essay at the Society for Media Studies annual conference in Montreal in 2015.

24. Attributed to Michel Foucault, the term biopolitics references the power of the government to manage life, whether through structural policies that support and sustain certain populations' life expectancy or that subject certain populations to oppressive practices that undermine their life chances and let them die. See Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76,* eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, Trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003): 239-64. For an anthology of major writings on biopolitics, see Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze, eds. *Biopolitics: A Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

25. Attributed to Giorgio Agamben, the concept of "bare life" references populations who exist as mere bodies without the political enfranchisement of citizenship or recognized personhood. See Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

26. Attributed to Achille Mbembe, the term "necropolitics" references populations

that, although living, are subjected to such dire government and economic policies that they exist within “death-worlds” and might be understood to have already been killed by the state. See Mbembe, “Necropolitics.” *Public Culture* 2003 15 (1): 11-40.

27. Alexander Weheliye, *Habeous Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

28. Black skins of sorts appear in various other iterations in the film: the alien’s supervisor’s motorcycle gear, the Czech man’s wet suit, and the leather jacket the alien’s suitor loans her.

29. My thinking here is shaped by — and somewhat twists — Judith Butler’s essay, "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy.” As part of her biopolitical turn, Judith Butler has questioned whose lives count as grievable lives and has advocated for the importance of fantasy in political life. Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 17-39.

30. In a curious post-script, blackness figures as pure knowledge, as the super-human capacity for cognition and consciousness at the resolution of Scarlett Johansson’s follow-up film *Lucy* (Luc Besson, 2014). On Lucy, see Marc Francis's essay in this dossier, "Splitting the Difference: On the Queer-Feminist Divide in Scarlett Johansson's Recent Body Politics."

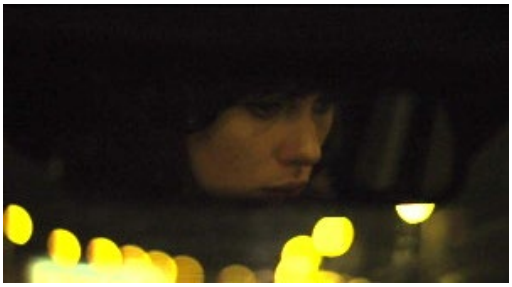
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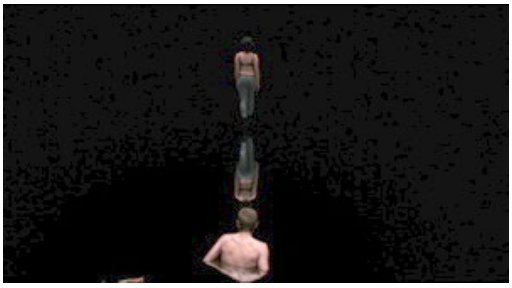
JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Sex, sensation and nonhuman interiority in *Under the Skin*

by Elena Gorfinkel



Under the Skin exhibits Jonathan Glazer's aesthetic preference for luminous and rich sensory images, as in this frame that highlights the contrast of darkness, light flares, partial views and reflection.



A scene of capture in the oily black pit as the alien seduces her "prey."



The alien's lack of empathy is questioned in a scene in which she ignores a crying baby while killing a man on a beach.

Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2013) is an exercise in cinema as a sensorial machine. The film is preoccupied with the systematic capture of bodies, of flesh and light, of faces and skins, of elemental substances like fog, rain and watery rocks, smoke and snow, glass panes and thick woods, the luminous and the numinous. Like a sensory overstimulation chamber, the film presents us from its start with a surfeit of contradictory material that veer from the experimentally abstract to the verité. We watch the formation of geometric shapes that suddenly appears as the building of an eye; then the inky dark roads illuminated by a glowing trail of car lights from a motorcycle; a woman's corpse, emitting a single tear, bluntly undressed in a blinding white light box.

Under the Skin tracks the movements of an alien predator in disguise, played by the sex symbol of our precarious times, Scarlet Johansson. Our alien-star body is a woman too womanly, painfully brought down-to-earth with tacky black wig, fake fur coat, tight acid washed jeans and heavily rouged lips. She trawls the streets of Glasgow in a white van luring unsuspecting men into a conversation and a ride. The alien's mesmeric point of view provides a detached, but sensate observatory of the thrumming rhythms of human activity in urban and rural Scotland. The alien's labor resembles therapy as much as seduction or abduction, as she coaxes details from her victims, makes them feel at ease, flirts and establishes their lack of connection or family. The unsuspectingly harvested men follow her into an unmarked house, hoping for the potential of a sexual encounter. As she entices them in, a pitch-black space opens up like a maw with an invisible oily pool that swallows her prey.

Her mission, observed and managed by a motorcycle riding black guard, soon gets derailed. The alien exhibits a chilling lack of empathy for her victims: she ignores a crying baby on a beach, whose parents have drowned trying to rescue their family dog, and opts instead to go in for a kill, targeting the heroic camper who attempted to save them. Yet after an encounter with a victim whose face suffers the congenital scars of neurofibromatosis, she is moved, through some force or motivation that remains opaque to us, to free him from his fate in the black pit. Shortly, Johansson's alien goes off the rails wandering away from her directed task, spurred on into some register of feeling. We can only inexactly impute, and perhaps we project, that she has found kinship with another being at odds with their corporeal exterior; however, the film and her blank affect reveal little of this action's causes.[1] [open notes in new window]

As the alien departs from her script, she inclines towards experiencing the patter of gesture and movement that she had earlier impassively studied through the car's windows more directly. She pursues small, constitutive pleasures, appetitive, aesthetic, sexual, self-confirming, that signal corporeal and sensory self-

awareness. An impeccable worker until she is not, we are shown the limits of her imperfect corporeal and behavioral mimesis. The failure of her training (she is made to hunt and seduce) to prepare her for human relations and the failure of her body and capacity to be socially reproductive becomes a harrowing ordeal. Without her "operating system" and its codes—the van, the routine of the "work," the learned language of seduction—she is unmoored into an aleatory space, encountering the human at close range; but it is a closeness that demands permeability, assimilation, vulnerability. The demands of such permeability are violent, her fleshly disguise becoming a malleable substance exposed to the force of male desire, violation and finally assault and murder. These relations fray, exhaust and ultimately obliterate her, as her difference—a non-human difference masquerading fatefully as a sexual difference—remains indigestible to its host organism, a human Earth.

Sense, surface



The film's surveillance gaze connects the apparatus of the van and the physical optics of the windshield.



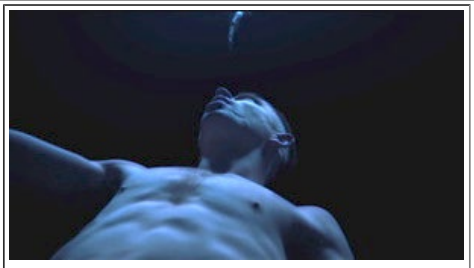
An amateur subject and passerby, caught unwittingly in the camera's estranging gaze as he speaks to Scarlett Johanssen, multiply disguised.

The film's narrative is largely unmoored from psychological motivation, causality, or conventional interiority, relying on atmospheric sound, electronic score and limited dialogue to instill an atmosphere at once seductive and surgical. Our attempts at semiosis are forcibly disaggregated from human ideality. Glazer has noted that the film, a nine-year effort, began with a feeling, that it was derived from something "more felt than thought."[2]

Even while it offers us the content of her vision, the sensory nature of her perceptions, the physicality and arduousness of her embodied travails, the film poses the problem of the difficulty and indeed impossibility of imagining, figuring cinematically, the contours of alien consciousness. Formally, this difficulty is fundamentally tied to the non-human apparatus of the film camera itself. Small, embedded hidden cameras deployed in the van, from which the spectator observes the alien driving, inviting men in for a ride, shoot these scenes of capture in a verite style. It perpetuates a spectatorial experience of dispassion, in the technicity of a surveillance gaze. The cameras, built expressly by Glazer's production company for the film, extract from its amateur subjects —non-professional passersby—performances largely devoid of self-consciousness. This is of course in a film that soon concerns itself with its protagonist's heightened self-awareness as alien, and Johansson's acting style toes a line between the mechanistic and the naïve in her habitation in the alien's hidden skin.

The film thus bears a certain isomorphic shape. Crew and shoot concealed, housed inside the van, covertness and disguise are a function of production process and design as much as thematic material. The images that these procedures produce are sundered from subjectivity or depth-models of character and represent optical or physical points of view. Pure externality reigns. The hidden camera footage remains "strange" and estranged from an anchoring subject. Ara Osterweil suggests, in her account of the film, that the point of view is "triply mediated" by camera, alien's perspective and the van window.[3] Psychology is repelled at every turn, even as these shots come to rest in an understanding that they are approximations of the alien's amorphous, ambivalent gaze. This element of the film parallels with Leos Carax's *Holy Motors* (2012), which delineates a narrative universe woven through with invisible cameras that multiply the ubiquitous potential of performance and enactment as the basic condition of its world. *Under the Skin* thrums in contrast to Carax's work however with the energy of suspicion, the image's deceptive plenitude modulated by an

enigmatic foreboding.

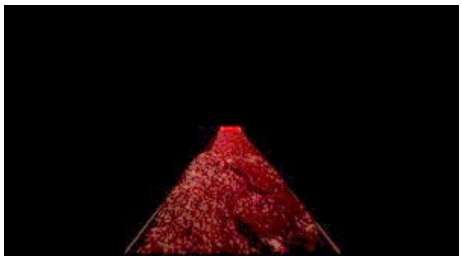


The figuration of one of the captive's bluing flesh from inside the dark pool, seen from the perspective of the bottom of the pit.

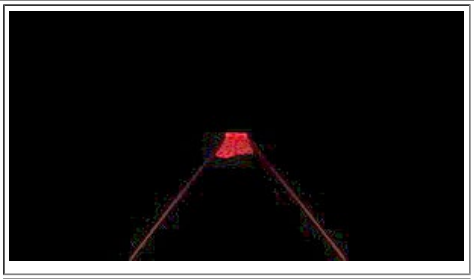


The collapse of another victim's body, that of the swimmer, (as witnessed by the dying captive in the prior image). The body collapses into a sack of skin that has been expunged of its contents, and sucked into the void.

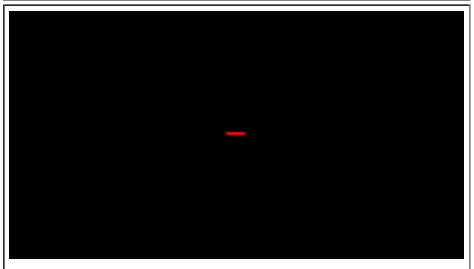
Stylistically, *Under the Skin* expressly solders extreme abstraction with the meat of the morphological in unexpected ways. In addition to the use of extreme chromatic fields (as discussed by Lucas Hilderbrand in this issue), this formal challenge can be seen, for example, in the spectacular dematerializing transformation of the human harvested male meat, rendered as blue translucent flesh, that splits, a sack of skin, converting into fluid viscous and molten red material which chromatically overtakes the images. The meat sludge it gets pushed and churned down a chute, turning over and converting into the depthless perspectival line of red at the center of the screen, a horizon of red that turns the image from a figurative to an abstract, animated visual field. To read this image, in which human bodies have been transformed into radiant red slop on a conveyor belt and then into the abstraction of a crimson line of glowing light, gestures to a horizon of ecological negation and violent transvaluation, one to which the film's end—and this discussion—will return.



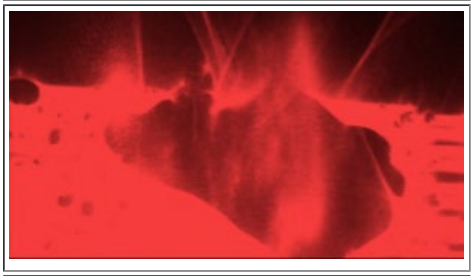
The trajectory from meat to abstraction is manifested in chromatic terms, as the liquid flesh is pumped down a conveyor belt, akin to molten lava in a perspectival horizon point.



The red sludge of meat appears to roll up like a scroll in this sequence of frames, as the flow of violently dematerializing bodies, converted into fiery color, is **[word missing].**

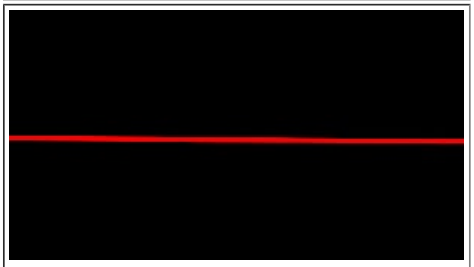


Bodies are transvalued and abstracted further into a single glowing red line in the distance. The glowing abstraction of the line holds within it the horror of death and decomposition, a world beyond figural



The spectator is seemingly given entry into the space of the line and into the molten lava of bodies as a churning red liquefaction overtakes the whole image.

representation.



The red line returns, insisting on the power of the void as a function of visual abstraction.



A cut to a fully red frame with a generating star signals some turning point in the films attempt to negotiate the tension between the nonhuman and an imagining of alien consciousness.

Having established some of the formal and affective terms of the film, this essay asks: what vision of sex and what modes of corporeal intractability does the film present? And what kinds of phenomenological engagement do these forms demand—particularly on the film's first viewing? Organized by an examination of two scenes, a couplet of failed eating and failed fucking, this essay considers how these events articulate the film's ambivalences regarding the heft of a manufactured body derailed into seeking pleasure, oriented by a renewed "desire to desire." The film's formal fixation on sensorial flooding and estrangement of cinematic vision extends from a concern with the nature of an alien embodiment, in the absence of a legible subjectivity to ground it. The problem of the *impossible* perspective of the alien emerges in the film's denouement as the challenge of recognizing strangeness and distinctness through the figure of sexual difference. I do wonder, as does Lucas Hilderbrand in his account of the film's racial inflections in this issue's dossier, the extent to which difference can stand as the grounds for the film's drive towards formal and ideological abstraction?[4] Pursuing the roles of sensation, sexual difference and the film's courting of an impossible, asubjective interiority as a way into these questions, will lead me towards a more speculative horizon, as I will suggest that the film can be seen to stage an encounter of sorts between feminist theory and new theories and philosophies of materiality and the non-human.



Vera Chytilova's *Daisies* imagines female appetite as a joyously anarchic drive of excess, sensory overload, and defacement.

Impossible orifices: indigestible

The film's generation of a striving to apprehend human consciousness as sexual and appetitive self-consciousness is articulated in two scenes of specularity and interiority, in the alien's encounter with eating and with sex. As Linda Williams, among others, have elaborated, the ontology of cinematic representation relies on the screening out and marking as ob/scene or off-scene the human sex act. Cinema's pornographic imaginary has long allied faciality and genitality, the penetrability of vaginas and mouths.[5] It is no wonder that the first film to introduce to U.S. audiences to the publicly exhibited penetrative sex act in a narrative feature context, *Deep Throat* (1972), relied on the spectacle of oral sex, stupendously dramatized by the actress Linda Lovelace's ability to swallow as if consuming the entirety of the male organ. The mouth and lips of stars, since the development of the close-up, have always been an erotically privileged feature of the face, as they signaled the *sine qua non* of female allure. By extension, orality in screen sex is not a supplementary but a fundamental precept of the cinema's interest in the limits of bodies and pleasures.

Another kind of appetitive orality, eating on screen, like the image of the real sex act, is emblazoned with a truth function. Watching an actor eat is a confirmation



Chantal Akerman eats a bag of sugar in *Je Tu Il Elle*, drawing a linkage between orality, melancholic desire and duree.



Andy Warhol's *Mario Banana* further illustrates the conjunction of eating as both a literal and metaphoric extension of sexual appetite.

of their alimentation the contact of substance and their insides, an act and register of an unseen corporeal process. Eating, a filmed event much like the largely overlooked ubiquity of breathing, cannot, by and large, be faked. It sustains the margin of an unsavory, invisible element of an actor or star's physicality. Many filmmakers have deployed the act of alimentation as device to question the bounds of the medium and its investment in the work and movements of the body. Varied cinematic scenes of eating come to mind. Vera Chytilova's orgiastic banquet scene in *Daisies* (1966), in which two young women gorge at an overfull, decadent table set for absent guests, lampoons the conjunction of femininity, appetite and the austerities of state socialism with a spectacle of exuberantly wasteful enjoyment. In a completely different register, Chantal Akerman in her first feature *Je Tu Il Elle* (1974) merged the scene of duration with the act of ingestion, as the director-actor, in a state of melancholia over an absent lover ate sugar naked in bed for what seemed days. And Andy Warhol's *Mario Banana* (1964), in which the trans-superstar Mario Montez fellates and eats a banana for the camera in long take and closeup, takes the connection of sexual performance and appetite towards one representational extreme of displacement. Montez's performance throws into relief the ways that eating (and not eating) a banana become a metonym of sex, even as it simultaneously marks off the limits between eating and sex as bodily processes of subsumption, ingestion, incorporation.

In this wider context, it is telling that the alien's first act of self-determinative autonomy from her employment as harvester and lure of human flesh, she attempts to harness an experience of human enjoyment, a corporeal experience for itself, for herself, and for no other. (Is there a trite joke here about women and sex and chocolate?) In the prior sequences, the alien leaves her station as harvester. Walking out from the van, she steps into a white field of dense fog. Subsequently we observe her sitting in a restaurant, as she confronts a piece of chocolate cake she has ordered.

Here the work of Johansson's mouth, her heavily rouged and plumped lips becomes a threshold, a pornographic sublime. The first portion of the film has already imprinted this body-part-object as a formal motif and image of narcotizing recurrence. Mouth and lips, cavity and cavern are eroticized and eroticizable both by the film, and by Johansson's effulgent star text.



Under the Skin's fixation on the erotics of Scarlet Johansson's rouged lips reinforces the importance of orality to her scene of exploratory taste.



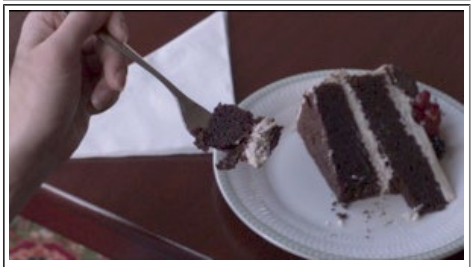
The objectness of the chocolate cake, in a shot that announces its strangeness to the spectator vis a vis the alien's perspective.



The alien looks at the cake.



The pace with which the camera anatomizes the encounter with the cake, proceeds with a hesitation and slowness ...

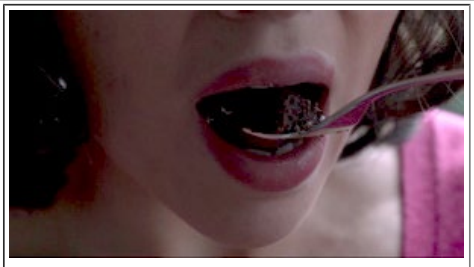


... as the alien deliberately cuts the cake with a fork ...

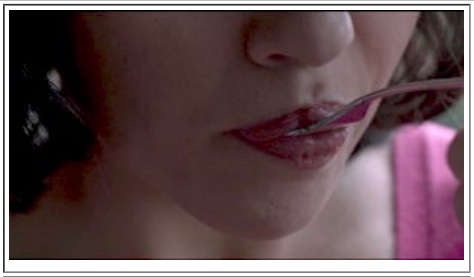


... and haltingly lifts it to her mouth.

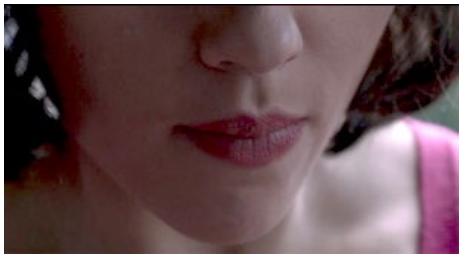
The point-of-view shot that observes the cake lingers for an extended take on the image of the alien's hand awkwardly holding her fork aloft, then severing ever so surgically, a corner then bringing it up to her mouth, an act presented with hesitation. The cake looks back, suddenly made strange, even as it is put into quotes—a generic category, "a slice of cake." In the drenched air of disguise, one wonders, is this cake passing as cake? Its objectness suddenly mimetically summoned as a mirror image of her blankness, elsewhere in the film—she a "withdrawn," reticent object, and now this cake is one. She chews the cake and is unable to swallow it. She spits it out in a coughing repulsion, an involuntary spasm. A reverse shot reveals the disturbance as a tear in the social, as she is observed by restaurant goers—couples, families—her attempt at gastronomic normalcy a reflex disturbance.



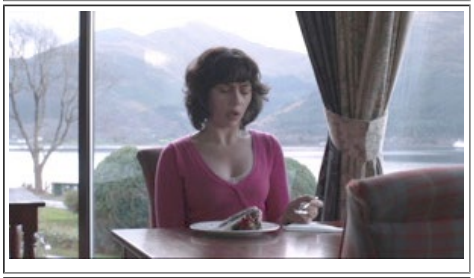
The linkage of literal and subjective and erotic interiority is figured by the film as an encounter with the alien's insides.



The impossibility of the act of eating, seen here in the alien's awkward mastication, ...



... is matched with the sense of potential of taste, pleasure and enjoyment, and experience that the spectator knows.



The cake is ejected from the alien's body ...



... as she spits the bite onto the table ...



... suggesting a blockage to her human subjectivation, an experience that is inaccessible to her.

What is "her" body in this moment, in the recognition of her lack of an alimentary tract, in her unwilled spasm of rejection? Neither vomit nor human waste, the chocolate cake grows suddenly unappetizing, a brown splotch on the table. Anality circumvented, her inability to consume implies the lack of waste. Upon a first viewing, this repulsion produces for the spectator an element of shock, or resistance. We cannot know her inside, even as that sense of desire and knowledge feels contaminated in the very moment of its recognition. But *something* is indeed *wasted,* squandered—a potential for pleasure foreclosed. While outlining here the progression of a first viewing and its affective resonances, we can also recognize that it is a mirror of a later scene that isomorphically traces and inscribes, like a speculum, another limit of the alien's insides, a new "lack" seen and scene otherwise.

Further the experience we might ascribe to the alien's eating of cake remains incommensurable. What might cake taste like to an alien? These are things that are bidden as beyond our knowledge, impossible interiors, questions that can only be centrifugally expelled, pushed outwards. The untranslated physical sensation is mustered and refused, only possible as a repulsion. Her alien body rejects its environment and the customs that would acculturate her, make hers *like* other bodies. Mimesis can only go so far. This serves as a scene of pathos, as we experience the impossibility of her human subjectivation. The taste of her freedom, while foreclosed, is left on the spectator's palate, sticking, like a piece of cake, to the roof of the mouth. The alien's unknowable embodiment provokes an idea of an appetite without measure, a harrowing, disorganizing drive, a desire to feel, to taste, to touch and to smell –a grasping for the correlation of relation, for reciprocity. An alien being strives to exist, estranged from her sense, attempting to feel her own limits, capacities, and boundaries.

Impossible orifices: impenetrable

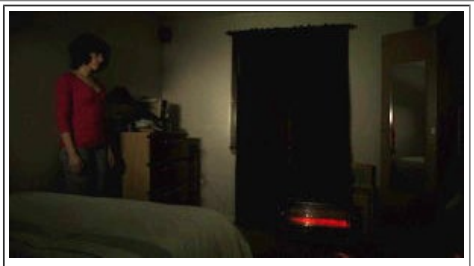


The alien is set adrift as she wanders onto a road in the cold near a bus stop, encountering a kind stranger.

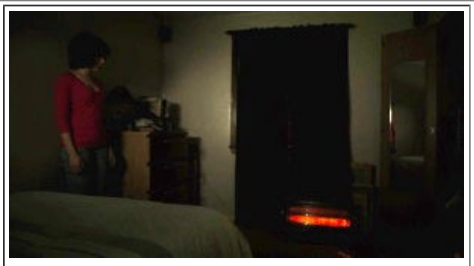
This oral gesture of negation and repulsion is mirrored in the alien's exploration of sex and of intimacy, a progression to subjectivation that shifts from orality to genitality. Soon after the failed eating of the cake, she walks dazed along a village road, and tarries at a bus stop. She wears no coat, and is growing cold. On the bus a kind enough man asks if she needs help. After a pause she says "Yes," one of the few scenes of dialogue, and one of the few words spoken by her in the second half of the film.

On her first night in the man's house, he brings in an electric heater to warm the room, it glows preternaturally. She stands rigidly upright in the corner, and we wonder whether she will sleep standing up, the red line of the heater glowing. What are the conditions of survival of this body? What does she need to sustain her energy and capacity? The line glows brighter. We faintly recall the conveyor belt of human meat. She discovers her human body, illuminated in crimson, in the mirror. It is a scene of prehension and phenomenological correspondence—as she

watches her body move as if a marionette, bending her knee, examining the curve of her back, seeing herself in reflection for what seems the first time.



At the strange man's house, the alien stands awkwardly in the corner ...



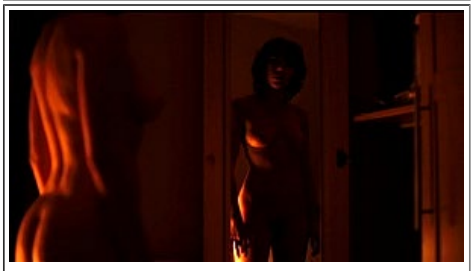
... in the warming glow of the heater, incapable or unaware of sleep.



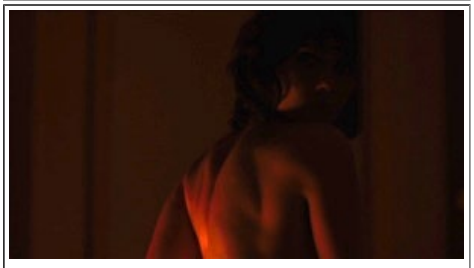
The heater becomes figurative, its humming mechanicity a source of illumination, as we see that the alien is undressed and her legs are bare.



The alien seems to recognize her body as an object, as she raises her knee to view her own movement in the mirror.



Staring at herself in the mirror the alien sees her own figure anew, seemingly and speculatively, in a different light than in the earlier mirror scenes of the film. The alien's erotic selfhood is foreshadowed.



She flexes her back muscles in the mirror, observing the contours of a flesh alien to herself.

The stranger's kindness of course has a telos, and it arcs into a romance, an inverse seduction, heteronormative-style. He takes her on a "date" to a ruined castle, lifting her up in his arms to rescue her from stepping in a puddle in a chivalric gesture lost on its recipient, who cannot read such codes. He encourages and coaxes her to enter into the deep maw inside the ancient castle, and walk down its dark steps, which she does with great hesitation. He whispers reassurances at the bottom of the steps.



The stranger's kindness arcs into a romance plot, as he takes her for an excursion to a nearby ruined castle. The chivalric act of protecting the lady from a puddle is made visible as an absurdly gendered convention, a custom with an alien recipient blind to its meanings.

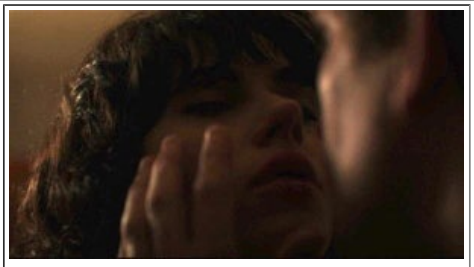




Coaxing her into the dark cavelike interior of the ruin, the alien's suitor reassures the seemingly frightened woman. The scene parallels the alien's own earlier seductions in the dark house.

One can speculate that the entire trip to his house and the next day's descent into the darkness of the ruin's remains instills trepidation and fear in the alien, mirroring her own harvesting and the spaces of capture earlier in the film. We can only speculate.

The night they go on their excursion, she gives herself up and over to the kind strange man, as he kisses her slowly, and takes off her jeans. She is wearing the underwear of the dead girl from the film's beginning, she lies flat in the same pose as the corpse, being undressed, she not yet dead.



Back at the house after their "date," the erotic plot unravels. The alien gives her face up to the man in an act of seeming surrender.



An overhead shot of her on the bed echoes the opening sequence's framing of the female corpse, shot from a similar angle.



Her panties are removed, in the same set of gestures that attended ...



... the stripping of the dead woman of her garments by our alien.

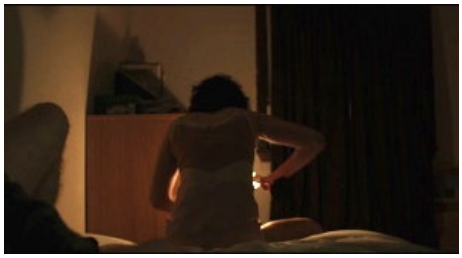
He mounts her and attempts to penetrate her, we see a flash of their bodies entwined from an undesignated point-of-view between them—after a number of thrusts, perplexed, the man dismounts mid-coitus. She jumps up to the edge of the bed, and with an athletic energy, an admixture of adrenaline or fear, she grabs a table lamp and looks down at her genitals. The shot is framed from behind, the illuminated image like a magic lantern show, a painterly reckoning with and through light. There is no cut to a point of view shot to what she sees, an impossible orifice.



Being mounted by her host in missionary position, the alien expresses some awkward register of pain or discomfort.



A cutaway shot that situates the camera in the vague space between the alien's and the man's bodies, confirms the difficulty of the sex act.



Rendered impenetrable, the alien jumps to the edge of the bed and grabs a lamp, attempting to see what is located in the zone between her legs.



The alien's self examination is observed from behind, and the light of the lamp creates a magic lantern effect as she attempts to see herself. The specifics of what the alien sees, presumably the lack of a vaginal opening, is not given through a reverse shot.



But the foreclosure on her capacity for sexual pleasure is proferred in the attention given to her darkened face, staring out the window onto an unknown horizon.

She stares bewildered out the window; the spectator can only see this as a larceny of her nascent personhood, her currency and capacity for experience and sensation suddenly foreclosed. This scene shocks in its pace, shocks in the primacy of a look that cannot be shown, a self-specularization. We also cannot look at what she looks at, a double blot. When was the last time a film showed a woman looking at her vagina, existent or non-existent? An incendiary look, not into a mirror, but a look that nevertheless refracts the remains of a face in lieu of a genitality. Looking into herself, again she finds an involuntary rejection, a reversion to externality. Her body is not her own, and her body is only face. She cannot make it her property—self-possession is unattainable. This sex act feels like an end, the arc of a timeline, a reproductive and relational horizon forestalled, a dysphoric recognition. She is thrust into action, repelled outwards, now on the run.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Speculum of the Other



The alien looks in the mirror in the house she works in—right after capturing the deformed man. This is a constitutive scene that bisects the film's narrative, the opacity of the mirror implying the alien's straining towards another mode of being, and a moment of faint recognition.





The recursive refractions, enacted here in the reflective surfaces of the inky pool on which the alien walks leading her prey; the space of the image cleaves into two, vacuuming extraneous detail into darkness.

The above scene of the alien's looking at her own genitality is riddled with contradictions and reversals. But it can also be associatively used to recover some feminist philosophical legacies, as it projects them outwards against depth and onto surface. I propose to read and think through these moments in *Under the Skin* within French feminist Luce Irigaray's axiomatic metaphor of the speculum. In her first published work, *Speculum of the Other Woman,* (published in France in 1974)Belgian-born Irigaray challenges the structure of Western thought and metaphysics as built around metaphors of male visibility, constituted as coherence, unity, sameness and linearity. Western philosophy by its very structure thus banishes from its premises the female and her iteration of *the* difference, sexual difference. She is made to not exist, converted into a symptomatic lack. Philosophy makes her sexuality un-incorporable and unfigurable. Irigaray pursues a discursive deconstruction and reorientation in which she restages the preoccupations of Western thought from Aristotle to Freud vis-a-vis the manifestation of a female morphological imaginary. She writes,

> "But which 'subject' up till now has investigated the fact that a concave mirror concentrates the light and specifically, that this is not wholly irrelevant to woman's sexuality? . . .Which 'subject' has taken an interest in the anamorphoses produced by the conjunction of such curvatures? What impossible reflected images, maddening reflections, parodic transformations took place at each of their articulations?"[6] [open notes in new window]

Irigaray's speculum, its "impossible reflected images" and "maddening reflections" is oriented to both to the history of feminist critiques of Western metaphysics and its representational aporias, as well as its potential for productive mimetic distortion. Forcing the problem of visibility from the perspective of the female body's figuration as site of knowledge and space of non-knowledge, as both architecture and axiom for confounding the epistemic gaze of the philosopher, Irigaray seizes on the complex and multi-valent use of the speculum, as both physical optic object and metaphor for patriarchal modes of knowing. This sense of the speculum has a hermeneutic force for the film in its Irigarayan implications—in its use as a trope of producing knowledge about the woman through devices of projection. But it also bears out in its broader, gyno-historical inflections, as a dilatory device that opens up a cavity of the body (in the gynecological instance, the vagina) in order to image it. Process and image here become coextensive. In its physio-optical inflections, its curved reflective surface provides an inexact mirror that provides both index and distortion.

I propose that the film takes on the morphological and ontological legacy of the speculum as one of its formal logics. The reflective function operates at a macro, extrapolated level of formal structure. *Under the Skin* is full of such reflective, distended surfaces, which transform distinct images across an unfathomable breach of difference, either through editing or effects or acts of a larger structural, narratological curving across the body of the film. Mirrors, reflective surfaces, inversions of form and symmetrical structures proliferate. Most broadly, the films fundamental inversion splits the film into inverse halves—the alien predating, working, watching, surveying, and then subsequently being predated; she is at

first mobile hunter, an enclosed driver, and then an exposed, hunted, vulnerable pedestrian; she is exteriorized and interiorized; she lures men into cavernous spaces, and then is herself forced (under the auspices of another form of seduction, that of romantic pretense not sex) into a cavernous ruin, forcing herself into an impossible depth. The alien is extractor and she is extracted, labor power that then becomes an exploitable resource, a body for the taking and the violating by virtue of her visible, presumably "vulnerable" feminine form, no longer a lure but easy prey.

Oddly enough, a speculum appears in video game designer and theorist Ian Bogost's discussion of the nature of speculation in thinking about the philosophy of object being. Bogost presents the speculum as a hermeneutic tool of distortion and inexact transfer, with which to describe and account for the autonomy, the self-sufficiency of a world comprised of things, things that do not need humans to exist and be thought, but that have relations and interactions with other things—"*to speculate how things speculate*." Bogost writes,

> "A *speculum* is a mirror, but not in the modern sense of the term as a device that reflects back the world as it really is, unimpeded and undistorted. As Narcissus proved, a reflection is different enough to hold power, including the power of drunk love. The lesson holds beyond mythology: from ancient times to the middle ages, a mirror was an imprecise device, usually a convex disc that reflected enough light to give a viewer a rough sense of the figure placed in front of it. Only a rough sense…the speculum of speculation is not a thin, flat plate of glass onto which a layer of molten aluminum has been vacuum sprayed onto it, but a funhouse mirror made of hammered metal, whose distortions show us a perversion of a unit's sensibilities."[7]

The speculation Bogost's speculum here affords is one far afield from it as medium of penetration, corporeal dilation but not entirely at odds in its capacity for curving, with Irigaray's sense of the speculum's potential as another way of knowing female subjectivity, despite its legacy of epistemic capture. While Bogost is concerned with the existence of objects and their "unit operations," he seeks in the speculum that perversion that distorts the object, that accepts all objects as only accessible through fundamental distortion, due to the nature of their existence in excess and outside of human thought. Perhaps the specula of Irigaray and Bogost are irreconcilable, but I think placed alongside each other, as conceptual objects, they reveal the thorny problem of relationality and how to *be with* difference that haunts *Under the Skin*.

Sexual (in)difference

While rendered through the hardy motifs of science fiction and noir, Glazer's film can thus be postioned as an instantiation of debates occurring within and between feminist and queer theory and the philosophical manifestation of what Richard Grusin has aggregated as the "non-human turn," (and that include speculative realism, object oriented ontology, and "new materialisms," of which Bogost's work is also part.) [8] Speaking broadly, the latter bodies of thought have staked a claim on theorizing the non-human, and exploring a de-hierarchized creaturely life, as well as the vitality of living and non-living things, that exist apart from human knowledge, perception or thought about them. Countering the anthropocentrism of prior philosophical traditions in which the human was figured as the center of a world that could be thought, speculative realism and object-oriented approaches consider the nature of the object as a self-contained unit, leveling hierarchies between species, genuses, or categories of object.[9] They counter an epistemological approach that accepts our knowledge of things as conditional to

human perception. Graham Harman, one key thinker in this field, in particular proposes that all objects are fundamentally inaccessible, "withdrawn objects" that co-exist with each other but pre-exist human involvement.[10]

The subject and motifs of Glazer's film hint at the contours of some of these notions regarding a world of objects through its perspective of estrangement. But it also cross-pollinates them with feminist concerns. The film produces a convergence of the sexed object of desire with the alien as "object," a seemingly "withdrawn" form, unfathomable, "inaccessible" through frames of human knowledge, but existing for and of itself. The alienness of the object merges with an explicit alienness thematically and generically, an alienness clearly forged through gender and sexual difference. *Under the Skin* thus "returns to sender" the philosophical and political problem of the object in late capitalist modernity. Countering an abstracted wonderment in a flattened ontology of coeval things, the film takes it, forward and back, to the intractable domains of sexual difference.[11] Is the difference of sexual difference the housing mechanism—a "Trojan Horse," the host body?—of the alterity of non-human matter itself, its processes and relations?[12] Or might it be the other way around, when seen in the films preponderance of clouded, clotted mirrors?

Inhuman matters

> "Thus the 'object' is not as massive or as resistant as one might wish to believe. And her possession by a 'subject,' a subject's desire to appropriate her, is yet another of his vertiginous failures. For where he projects a something to absorb, to take, to see, to possess…as well as a patch of ground to stand upon, a mirror to catch his reflections, he is already faced by another specularization. Whose twisted character is her inability to say what she represents. The quest for the object becomes a game of Chinese boxes. Infinitely receding. The most amorphous with regard to ideas, the most obvious 'thing,' if you like, the most opaque matter, opens upon a mirror all the purer that it knows and is known to have no reflections. Except those which man has reflected there but which, in the movement of that concave speculum, pirouetting upon itself, will rapidly, deceptively, fade."[13]

If we return to Irigaray's account of specularity and the speculum, we find the above passage, that notes that the desire for the object is grounded in a fundamental failure, in that it leads to an object that can only refract and never reflect, can only capture the nature of its own desire, even as it eludes the grasp of meaning. What Irigaray describes about the grasping for the (female) object by the (male) subject, if placed alongside the ending of *Under the* Skin, produces some remarkable symmetries, the opaque matter, the maddening muteness of the object, a mirror with no reflections but those reflected, projected by a logic of masculinist power and subsequent disappointment. But what happens when that very conjunction of sexual difference also becomes the lever between human and non-human form?

Under the Skin exposes cinema's thorny desire for the figuration of a *subjec*t, writ large, as the most seductive and most impossible project, refracted in the mute and brute materiality of alien flesh. The conclusion of the film reveals a thingly flesh that is made to violently evaporate, to doubly burn out of the image, to disappears as quickly as it is revealed. What is this black tarry substance, this clammy, clay-like epidermis—which appears as much plastic as dirt, organic and manufactured, charred before it is charred again? The skin of the alien cannot touch the human atmosphere without being snuffed, burned out, defaced. The pursuit of an impossible interiority, and the tissue between inside and outside,



Under the Skin's conclusion proffers an alien body, its skin finally exposed to a threatening human atmosphere. The alien's blackness

arrests the spectator with its peculiar materiality, its texture evoking multiple signifiers of difference.

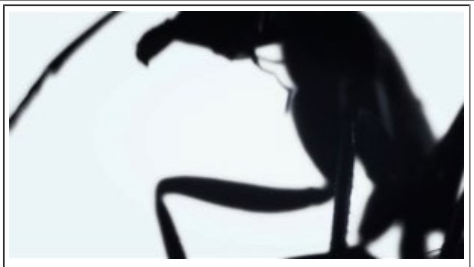


The alien's rest and solace found in the woods, and both her fundamental homelessness and situatedness amidst and within a natural landscape is figured by the film as a fusion, in this superimposed frame.

presents sites of opacity, non-meaning, non-understanding—the "dark matter," which in multiple figural registers haunts the aesthetic imaginary of the film and its conceptual drifts.

This difficulty of figuring alien interiority, the cinematic impulse to ascertain that interiority, undoes itself in the multiplying apparitions of other forms of difference. The concluding trajectory of the film speaks as much to the conjunction of racial mattering with an ontological limit,[14] as to the nagging resonance and affect of the alien's experience, less as woman, but perhaps even more persuasively as a transgendered embodiment.[15] What is this attempt at "becoming female" (pace Osterweil) more like than the brutality accorded to transgendered lives, in their struggles to live in another skin? As some transgendered viewers have noted, the account of the alien's struggle to assimilate echoes the experience of a trans estrangement. J. Hoberman more crudely describes the alien as "an implacable agendered It." These abjected *others within the other* - the racialized subject, as Hilderbrand accounts for here in this dossier, the transgendered subject, the female subject—coagulate and intersect at the site of a fantasy sexual difference. Like Irigaray's "Chinese box," the site unravels and refracts, re-occupied by other specters of difference.

It seems fitting, then, that the film's penchant towards abstraction incorporates the motifs of a new materialist objectness, and the continuum between human objectification and thingly being. As the alien traverses the forest, lost and alone we see an image of her sleeping in the woods superimposed over a landscape of trees rustled by a thick wind. It recalls earlier moments of the alien's subsumption by or alignment with or attunement to the "natural" or the non-human environment, or her encounter with the force of material things: her encounter of the ant on her finger which has crawled off the corpse, her point of view of a fly buzzing on a glass pane door in the house where she ensnares men, right before she "frees" the disfigured captive; her face subsumed by light flares and refractions, and her figure lost in the white fog. Each of these in their way signal a continuum between her objectness and status as thing in the world alongside other creatures, beings and inanimate, inhuman yet vital things.



The affiliation of the alien with non-human, creaturely life, as well as with elemental substances and materials: in the opening, the alien spies an ant that crawls on her hand transferred from the body of the female corpse --the extreme closeup suggests the alien's POV.



Another insect, now a fly caught buzzing at a glass-paned door, is affiliated with the alien's perspective, in a sequence just prior to the release of the disfigured captive.





The elemental saturation of light fuses with the functions of the nonhuman lens of the camera, producing an image that bathes the alien in an otherworldly light.	Following the above motif, a similar saturation effect, is deployed as “she” wills her own disappearance, dipping into the wafting white fog, going off course. The alien is aligned with the materiality of the physical world, placed in a continuum of encounter with its textures.

Yet the terms of this affiliation with thingness also bespeak a radical violence and dispossession, the route of the object’s abjection. The carnage of our alien heroine’s demise—her rape, assault and murder by fire, as she gets drenched in gas and immolated by her attacker—operates as an incontrovertible act that evokes sexual, transgendered and racialized violence, mobilizing internecine histories and barbaric traumas—lynching, witch burning, capital punishment, public torture. The film’s conclusion witnesses the reduction, the breaking down, of the body we have so closely shadowed to particulate matter—delimiting it to chromatic form and indistinction, receding into a horizon soon to be nonrepresentational, beneath the scale of our vision.



The immolation of the alien, whose inner skin has been revealed in the process of “her” rape and assault by a logger, summons histories of

We are presented with another specular inversion: instead of seeing inside, the inside “sees” the outside—in a logic of exteriorization—things only come out, transform into other forms. During the sexual assault, as her human skin is ripped off. The alien, breaking down, comes into contact with her human skin and face, coming face to face with herself. Disguise and exteriority meet where they undo each other, as the revelation of the alien skin underneath a human skin turns to flame. It is an image that burns, an image that disintegrates, shrinking

burning witches at the stake and other forms of barbarism that punish difference.



Under the Skin. The murder and immolation of the alien forces another transvaluation at the close of the film. The material remains of her body turn to ash, smoke, dust and air, crossing paths with the falling snow.



Under the Skin. The sensory perspective finds one of its final images in the shift from black to a white out, as snowflakes engulf the camera lens and the image will be obliterated in a white frame. The transformation and conversion of the alien's body into weather and atmosphere, echoes the end of Michel Faber's book.

from its own heavy collapsing figures, looking at each other's separability.

Here again the film's form works as a mode of negation that might deign to give us solace in its metaphysical beauty. An unknowable body turns into gas, air, light, water, moving upwards, exchanging its smoky path with snow. The transmission between smoke and snow, represent a dialectical transit in two opposing directions—rising and falling, black and white, heat, ash, and water, the intermingling of physical atmospheres, becoming weather, bestowing decay. Falling snowflakes descend in extreme closeup cover the camera's lens, threating white out, a complete obliteration of vision. The non-human perspective implies the pov of the dead body. The ending literally resorts to the last sentences of Michel Faber's novel, a redemptive gesture towards images that only superficially veil the brutality rendered on the films surface. In the novel the alien self-destructs, as she plans the exploding her own car, and the consequences of her combustion,

> "The atoms that had been herself would mingle with the oxygen and nitrogen in the air…Her invisible remains would combine, over time, with all the wonders under the sun. When it snowed, she would be part of it, falling softly to earth, rising up again with the snow's evaporation."[16]

The film's death scene is neither a planned suicide as it is in Faber's novel, nor is it like the replicant's timed expiration and life span in *Blade Runner* (1982). We actually have no sense of what the alien lifespan contains or sustains, its real or expected duration. The *Blade Runner* scene has its own revolt and pathos, but in Glazer's film the forceful eradication of life, the margins of the alien's "life-times" are rather narrow, easily extinguished, an arc of inevitability as the alien's function as worker has been obviated.[17]

We could see these elemental concluding images, and their resonance with the meanings of the novel's conclusion optimistically: as an imagining of a new materialist notion of entanglements, an intimate intertwining of elements, in "intra-action," the inhuman a sphere of ethical mattering. But this would perhaps give up or overlook the violent transvaluations that have taken place to produce them. We might do well to follow on Jordana Rosenberg's astute analysis and critique of the blind spots inherent in the ontological turn and its intersection with conceptions of difference and in particular queerness, and not to give into the romance of ontological de-individuation into matter's sheer contingency as the grounds of liberation. Prioritizing the "molecular" and the queerness of matter disavows the specificities of history and the inscription of power on bodies. Rosenberg writes,

> "No matter how much ontological work may posit the unenclosing of sexuality from the realm of the subject as the liberation of sheer desire from the burden of identity, from the *socius*, and from a considered, confrontational relationship to power, *do we truly want to be unleashed into pure aleatoriness*? ….There is something here, something pulling back from the surrender of the future to sheer contingency. That something is not the subject per se, or "the human," but the collective, which waits for us, and waits to be rediscovered in our theories of materialism, of the socius, of the ontological strangeness of life under capitalism. Surely the collective *is* that aleatory togetherness of which the ontological turn dreams—except this togetherness is one in which, at the end, we are not extinct but transformed."[19]

Rosenberg warns us not to elide the very clear forces, powers, and economies at play that might *benefit* from a mystification of agency and will, invested in the

speculative credit of the fantasy of a mute, deindividuated, subject-less matter. *Under the Skin* thus indulges the spectator's ineradicable desire for the alien's aspiration towards humanness, and encourages the spectator to strain to see details of the alien's subjectivity or legible inner life, enacted in the pursuits of sexual pleasure and corporeal enjoyment, housed in an oversaturated star body. This anthropocentric trajectory is matched with a refracting violence enacted upon the alien's otherness exposed, her illegible sexual form; it refuses her any further possibilities of relationality or sociality. Cinematically, the irrecoverable gap between non-human and human inner life is made tangible and sensible, paradoxically, through these final atmospheric images, of dissipation, decomposition, elusive loss; specular reflections that "rapidly, deceptively, fade."

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Notes

1. One could argue that this event, in which the man is ejected from the house, has little to do with the alien's agency, that it is not she but the larger system that employs her, or the black pit, that rejects the body of this particular captive.

2. Sam Adams, "Space Oddity: Jonathan Glazer on *Under the Skin*," *Rolling Stone,* April 4. 2014. http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/space-oddity-jonathan-glazer-on-under-the-skin-20140404#ixzz3AwPl9gCy (Accessed April 21, 2015)

3. Ara Osterweil, "*Under the Skin:* The Perils of Becoming Female," *Film Quarterly,* (Summer 2014), 46.

4. Lucas Hilderbrand "Out of the Blackness and *Under the Skin*," *Jump Cut*, Spring 2016.

5. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power Pleasure and the Frenzy of the Visible*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. 101-102.

6. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Gillian Gill, Trans. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985. 144. [return to page 2]

7. Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to be a Thing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 31.

8. Richard Grusin, ed. *The Non-Human Turn*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. Significant works in this wide field of inquiry include, Bryant, Levi, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, eds. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. re. press, 2011. Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects*, Open HumanitiesPress, 2011; much of this thought follows on the notion of "non-correlationism" forwarded in French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude,* which contends that Western philosophy's basic error since the Enlightenment has been to posit a correlation between human thought and the world, what he calls "correlationism." Quentin Meillassoux. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010. See also Steven Shaviro for his account of non-correlationist thought, Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. On new materialist and vital materialist approaches, see Diana Coole, Samantha Frost, eds.. *New Materialisms: Ontology Agency and Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010; Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

9. One anchoring notion within this body of thought is that of a "flat ontology," (derived originally from Manuel DeLanda's writing) which indicates a coevalness of things; each object has its own status as an individuated form, without criteria or distinction or hierarchy; Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, London: Bloomsbury, 2002, 2013. See also Bryant, *The Democracy*

of Objects; and Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology,* for varying takes of this concept.

10. Graham Harman. *Tool-being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Open Court Publishing, 2002; Harman, Graham. *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Open Court Publishing, 2005.

11. A political, identitarian critique of the "ontological turn" is most forcefully proposed by Jordana Rosenberg, who questions the return to ontology as a political symptom, and the fetishizing of contingency over collectivity and agency in, "On the Molecularization of Sexuality and some Primitivisms of the Present," *Theory and Event*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2014.) <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/546470> (Accessed Feb 12, 2016)

12. Glazer, in the *Rolling Stone* interview, refers to the eye in the opening as a Trojan Horse: "That eye is an interloper; it's a violation of something so intensely human, the human iris. It's somebody being inside us and looking at the world through this perfect disguise. It's a Trojan Horse." Adams, 2014.

13. Irigaray, *Speculum*, 134.

14. Analyzing photography, film and visual art, Alessandra Raengo elaborates a theory of race as an ontology of the visual in her *On the Sleeve of the Visual: Race as Face Value*, Dartmouth: Dartmouth College Press, 2013.

15. Willow Maclay, among other critics, has written about the implications of the film as an allegory for the experience of the transgendered, "Shine On: Transgender Allegory in *Under the Skin*," *The Vulgar Cinema* (Blog). March 10, 2015. <http://thevulgarcinema.com/2015/03/shine-on-transgender-allegory-in-under-the-skin/> (Accessed February 15, 2016.)
See also, Tessa Racked, "The Alien Gender: *Under the Skin*," *Consistent Panda Bear Shape: Fat People in Cinema*, (Blog) July 26, 2014. <https://pandabearshape.com/2014/07/26/under-the-skin-2014-dir-jonathan-glazer/. (Accessed February 1, 2016)

16. Michel Faber, *Under the Skin*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000. 296.

17. Neferti X.M. Tadiar, "Life-Times of Becoming Human." *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* v. 3 (March 1, 2012) <http://occasion.stanford.edu/node/75> (Accessed February 8, 2016)

18. These notions are drawn from Karen Barad, "On Touching: The Inhuman that I Therefore Am," *differences*. Vol. 23, No. 3: (2012) 219; see also, Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

19. Jordana Rosenberg, "The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present," *Theory and Event*. 17.2 (2014) np. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/546470> (Accessed Feb 12, 2016)

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Star vehicle: labor and corporeal traffic in *Under the Skin*

by Amy Herzog



Scarlett Johansson in Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2014).



The alien as hunter, bait, and industrial worker.



The remains of the alien's victims are reduced to empty, floating puffs of skin.

> "Ever more callously the object world of man assumes the expression of the commodity.... The commodity attempts to look itself in the face. It celebrates its becoming human in the whore."
> —Walter Benjamin, "Central Park" (42).

We are introduced to the streets of Glasgow through her manufactured eyes, she, an unnamed alien sent to Earth, to Scotland, for purposes that remain elusive. She is a worker, an operative who cruises the city looking for easy marks, single men with few entanglements. She seduces, she hunts, but not for herself. Instead she gathers these corporeal goods to be farmed, liquefied, and extracted, their residue collected and distributed for some unspoken use. She is an instrument, a vehicle that performs her tasks in tandem with a network of other operatives, namely her motorcycled overseer, and a complex of tools (a manufactured humanoid body, an unworldly viscous slaughtering pool, a white cargo van, a fur coat, a tube of lipstick). She is bait; she offers herself up within the rituals of this alien abattoir, and in doing so serves as fetish object, indentured vassal, and contracted executioner. Her labor rests ultimately in the value of her simulated body as an object of desire.

While she might at first glance appear to be an opportunistic seductress, her status is gradually revealed to be more complex. Her personal investments remain submerged, if they exist at all, and visually overpowered by her rapt amazement with the human world. The alien demonstrates no apparent gratification in duping her victims, and gains no immediate benefit from their entrapment. She serves as an inscrutable vehicle for a larger transactional web that remains, within the world of the film, beyond comprehension.

Under the Skin impressionistically riffs on Michel Faber's novel, troubling the boundaries between human and nonhuman subjectivities.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Scarlett Johansson's character undergoes an existential crisis as the film unfolds, finding herself compelled by certain human pleasures to which she has no access. Her attempts to break free from cycles of use and abuse are thwarted by the flimsiness of her own synthetic epidermis, and the interventions of her cohorts, those motorcycled drones that enforce the instrumental power of their alien economy. The film sheds far less light than Faber's novel does into the protagonist's subjectivity and motivations. This, coupled with the lush cinematography and keen attention to textures and surfaces, lends itself to readings similarly attuned to questions of form and surface. The overall impact of the film works to undermine the ostensible narrative of humanization offered by the novel. I find Glazer's rendering of the scenes of capture particularly revealing in this way. The grotesque spectacle of dismemberment and torture from Faber's text are replaced here with something slick, austere, and resistant to psychological



Scarlett Johansson as The Major in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017).



The alien becomes mesmerized by an ant found crawling on a body she has scavenged.



The alien learns, via mimicry, from shoppers at a mall.



The absence of empathy renders the alien's gaze inscrutable.

readings. The interiors of the bodies themselves melt away in a silent puff, leaving behind their shapeless floating skins. The implication is less that we are all the same beneath the skin than that, in fact, beneath the skin is nothing at all.

Glazer's film is rife with contradictions, fixated on surface-level perceptions that resonate uncomfortably with the systems of labor, exploitation, and consumption that the film depicts. These contradictions are manifest on multiple registers: the dissonance between the often-slick imagery of the film and its frenetic, erratic soundtrack; the simultaneous exposure and inscrutability of both human and alien bodies; the combination of "real" surveillance footage and hyper-stylized tableaux. The aliens are closely bound to the machines that enable them to perform their work (the van, the motorcycle), their subjectivities folded into the sensorium of their facilitated movements. Indeed, all the players in this universe serve as unwitting carriers, bearing values and burdens that thwart intentionality and individuation. I would include in this trajectory Johansson's current zeitgeist as an idealized non-or-superhuman avatar across a range of contemporary cinematic texts, including *Her* (Spike Jonze, 2013), *Lucy* (Luc Besson, 2014), and the soon-to-be-released *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017). What does it mean to perform as an instrument for use by another? Can one consent within a system that remains unknowable? And how might the very machinations of commercial cinema be entwined in these practices?

When she first emerges into the world of Glasgow, the creature sets to work, clothing herself in an outfit stripped from a woman dumped by the side of the road. The history and the fate of this woman are left unexplored. The alien ignores her human donor, but is soon lost in reverie examining a small ant she plucks from her immobilized body.

She goes to the mall. She fondles the fabrics, settling on a cropped jacket of mottled fur, and mimics the gestures of the female shoppers. The worker is a careful student; she attempts to look herself in the face, her new face, carefully applying a thick coat of bright crimson lipstick.

This mode of work feels at once familiar and utterly strange. Is she a sex worker? She uses sexuality, or the promise of sex, to initiate a transaction, but no sex is performed, and as best as we can tell she has no anatomical sex. She isn't, exactly, a commodity; exchanges are enacted, but the deal serves as a front for a reversal, whereby the body ultimately trafficked is that of the one who thought he was getting something for free. Is she a predator? A farmer? A livestock manager? Is this affective labor? The alien learns quickly how to survey her marks, to read nuances in human behavior, to draw out the details she needs, that the men ultimately want to share. But she lacks, at least at the beginning of the film, the faintest traces of empathy. Then again, perhaps caring labor does not require literally caring, which would only interfere with efficiency. She culls the prime candidates skillfully, and shuttles them quickly toward their end.

The alien's own narrative trajectory is more difficult to map. Johansson's face serves as a screen throughout the film, an extended Kuleshov experiment in which we watch her looking, endlessly gazing through the window of her van—it is difficult not to project our own desires onto that gaze, a gaze that can accommodate a wide range of interpretations, none of which are ever substantiated. The alien's empathetic lack is felt most poignantly in a scene at a beach, when she ignores the horrific drowning of a young couple attempting to rescue their dog, using the distraction as an opportunity to bludgeon a good

Samaritan with a rock. She walks past the couple's baby, who is screaming hysterically on the pebbled beach, unfazed. The film follows suit; we return to the beach later in a later scene, in darkness; the child is still there, still screaming.



She invites one of her marks to touch her face.

But a lack of caring does not indicate a lack of desire. "How strange," Ara Osterweil observes, "to experience the female gaze saturated with desire but unencumbered by care," and indeed, this unempathetic desire is what makes Johansson's character so unfamiliar and inscrutable.[2] The alien is thoroughly engaged in her conquests. Yet in the process, she (and we through her) undergoes a shift, one that registers most palpably after she picks up a young man with neurofibromatosis, which has radically disfigured his face. The alien brings him to the killing room, but then releases him, leaving him naked in the streets to fend for himself. It isn't clear precisely what about this encounter motivates her to free him (something he says? His vulnerability and loneliness? An affinity with his outsider status?), but she does, and she flees, and doing so sets in motion her own awakening and her violent end.



The alien seeks pleasure, but her body is not designed to ingest.

The alien begins to seek pleasure. She orders a piece of cake at a restaurant, delicately raises a forkful to her mouth, and then chokes. Her body has not been designed to ingest. Later, the runaway goes to bed with a kind man who has rescued her. She offers him her upturned face, awkwardly motionless, like a gift. They embrace, he undresses her, she caresses his face and hair—an unprecedented exchange of tenderness. But at the moment, ostensibly, of penetration, something goes wrong. He can't enter her. She scrambles to the edge of the bed and grabs a table lamp, spreading her legs. She attempts to look at herself. Our view is blocked, but we might presume that there is nothing to see; genitalia, pleasure, have no use or exchange value in her occupation, so, it seems, they were never manufactured.



She attempts to inspect her anatomy after a failed erotic encounter.

Her nascent shift in self-awareness can be traced to an earlier moment in the film. The alien's gaze has become disoriented, no longer focused on her prey, her point of view shots now linger on shop windows, on the flow of humanity on the streets. A sequence of tracking shots and shrill strings signals the beginning of a hunt, but now her gaze centers on a series of women. The alien walks down the street, lost in the traffic of people, advertisements, commodities, food stuffs. The camera assumes surveillance mode, documenting Johansson-as-alien as she travels down the sidewalk. Prior to this moment, the alien has always been surefooted and intent, if perhaps a bit wobbly in her heels. But now she falls.

It is December of 2012, and the Glazer production team shot this scene on the streets of Glasgow using small, covert cameras. Scarlett Johansson's character trips, sprawling face down on the pavement. She is helped to her feet by real-life passersby who do not realize they are being filmed, and appear not to recognize her. But the moment, in the real-world of Glasgow, is captured by paparazzi and pedestrians who do recognize Johansson as Johansson, and the images begin to circulate as trophies of celebrity carnage.



The alien on the streets of Glasgow.



The fall, as depicted in in the film.

There's something about Johansson's vulnerability in this image, her grimace, the awkward angle of the pose that makes this frame so ripe for paratextual use, tipping into corollary realms of signification with great velocity through this collective, evolving, cumulative chain of recontextualization.



The fall, as captured from the street.

I'd like to read the ScarJo Falling Down meme, which had enormous traction and breadth in its range of visualizations and cultural references, as an extension of the text of the film, a celebrity snap that is in fact a production still that self-generated its own virtual life. The meme relies on the collapsed categories that define Scarlett Johansson the commodity-image, an actualization of the aftermath of precisely the kind of affective, corporeal labor that the film reflects on representationally.





Scarjo Falling Down memes.

In *La Monnaie vivante* (or *Living Currency*), the philosopher, translator, and artist Pierre Klossowski sketches the contours of an economy that resonates with the one I've described here, an economy that subverts the paradoxical equivalences of capitalist exchange. Traditional commodity capitalism claims to insulate the human subject from being reduced to her labor as a slave; the abstract and neutral value of the *numéraire* serves as an intermediary, such that currency and goods can be exchanged in the place of a more base, direct traffic in human bodies. But Klossowski, drawing on Sade, points to the inherent perversity of this system:

> "Sous le couvert de la circulation des richesses, le numéraire ne fait qu'assurer sourdement l'échange des corps au nom et dans l'intérêt des institutions. Le désaveau de la monstrusité intégrale par les *institutions se retourne en une prostitution de fait, matérielle et morale."*
>
> "Underneath the pretense of circulating wealth, the *numéraire* only silently ensures the exchange of bodies, in the name of and in the interest of the institutions. The rejection of integral monstrosity by the *institutions is organized as de facto material and moral prostitution*."[3]

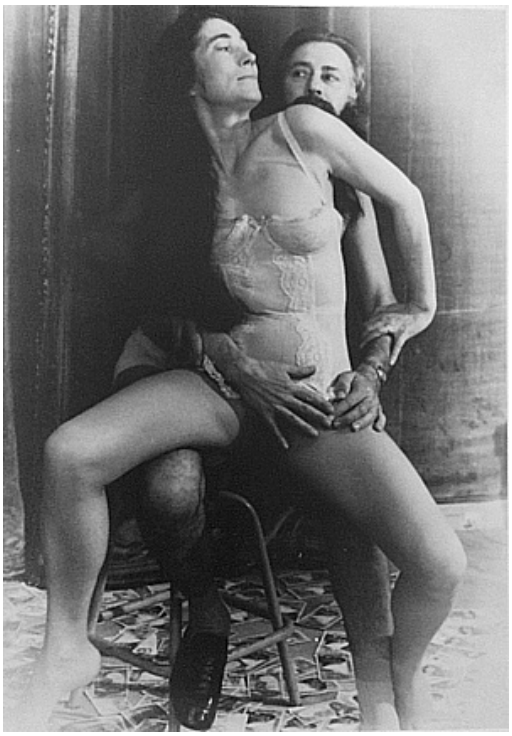


Denise Morin-Sinclaire (center) as Roberte in photographs by Pierre Zucca, included in Pierre Klossowski's book *La Monnaie vivante* (1970).

The object of currency, for Klossowski, like the goods and tools it purports to stand in for, can never be neutral or stable in value. Objects are perpetually subject to the needs, desires, and emotional *pulsions* of those subjects who generate their value. As such, objects can take the form of immaterial phantasms and simulacra, exceeding and overturning established notions of worth. Within this trade, subjects often similarly begin to circulate as objects of exchange, assuming the form of a libidinal currency, a shadow economy in which bodies become tools of trade, and sources of revenue.

La Monnaie vivante is an odd, hybrid volume, combining Klossowski's economic treatise with a series of drawings (by Klossowski) and photographs (by Pierre Zucca), staging scenes from Klossowski's erotic novels featuring the character Roberte. [FIG. 15] These images, which feature Klossowski himself and his wife Denise Morin-Sinclaire, depict frozen tableau in which the characters are engaged

in ambiguous and sexually-charged exchanges. These scenes, indeed like the prose of the *Roberte* series, are somewhat cold, impenetrable, and oddly clinical. In one photograph, for example, Roberte and a soldier appear to vie for a wooden cane, although it is unclear who is in control of the object, and the positions of their bodies do not indicate motion. A figure in a starkly patterned dress watches the couple impassively from the right side of the frame; a plush white fur rug splays out beside her. This image, like all the plates in the book, bears no direct relationship to the text, but it does serve to illustrate the complex circulation of bodies, symbols, and simulacra that populate Klossowski's economy.[4]



Denise Morin-Sinclaire (center) as Roberte in photographs by Pierre Zucca, included in Pierre Klossowski's book *La Monnaie vivante* (1970).

A wide swath of slippages occurs here: between the phantasmatic and the real, the philosophical and the sexual, the spectacle and the document, the symbolic and the utilitarian, the economic and the psychological, coercion and pleasure, subject and object. The inversions and doublings that occur are, for Klossowski, both productive and perverse. The "neutral" exchange of objects purported by capitalism is driven by "voluptuous emotions" and bodies whose value is determined by their "productive yield." Paradoxically, the best means of exposing these circuits and rerouting the system, Klossowski argues, is to cease imaging one's own value as distinct from one's earning potential or market rate, but instead to recognize the self as "living currency," fully part of this symbolic traffic.[5] Klossowski offers the example of the actress in discussing these relations, an "industrial slave" whose value and labor is indistinguishable from her image:

> "Dès que la présence corporelle de l'escalve industrielle rentre absolutement dans la composition du rendement évaluable de ce qu'elle peut produire—(sa physiognomie étant inseparable de son travail)--, c'est une distinction spéciuse que celle de la personne et de son activité. La présence corporelle est déjà marchandise, indépendamment et *en plus* de la marchandise que cette présence contribue à produire. Et désormais l'esclave industrelle ou bien établit une relation étroite entre sa présence corporelle et l'argent qu'elle rapporte, ou bien elle se substitute à la fonction de l'argent, étant elle-même l'argent: à la fois l'équivalent de richesses et la richesse meme."

> "As soon as the bodily presence of the industrial slave is absolutely included in figuring the appraisable yield of what he or she can produce (their physiognomy being inseparable from their work), it is specious to draw a distinction between a person and their activity. Bodily presence is already a commodity, independent of and *over and above* the commodity itself that such presence contributes to producing. And now, industrial slaves must either establish a strict relationship between their bodily presence and the money it brings in, or replace the function of money, and be money themselves: simultaneously the equivalent of wealth, and wealth itself."[6]

This act of replacement/becoming is not posited as necessarily liberating, and Klossowski remains vexingly vague about what such a submission might mean in practice. This is in fact the last paragraph of the text, and it is printed in the original version facing a photograph of Morin-Sinclaire in lingerie, seated confidently astride a bearded man wearing a watch, shoes, and socks and little else, on a stool before a velvet curtain, with 50 Franc notes strewn across the floor beneath them—an image in which the real wife of the author re-enacts a scene from the author's novels in which a man repeatedly gives his wife away. It is a provocation that is outrageously confrontational, and difficult to translate into a coherent philosophical or political call to arms.

Yet if one could imagine submitting to one's status as living currency, such an act would serve as a radical refusal of the false partitioning between symbolic and economic value, and the illusory distinction between objects and subjects as they orbit through shifting markets. It strikes me, too, as a devastating means of acknowledging the false unity of the self, and for disrupting the existing social machinery, and opening it to further misuse. If such an act were even possible, it might be suicidal. But perhaps not unlike Gilles Deleuze's "body without organs," living currency might function not as a model for being, but as a figural pole at the outer limits of a given social regime, a formulation that spurs new modes of thought and practice by laying bare covert aspects of the current operating system.[7] In the case of living currency, the outer limit gestured toward is one in which subject and object collapse, and value is no longer abstractly quantified.

Scarlet Johansson, I suspect, remains more closely aligned with the industrial slave in Klossowski's formulation than she does with the radical disavowal of living currency. But the almost seamless traffic in her voice and physiognomy through this array of representational registers signals something aboutthe already collapsed functioning of subject and commodity in our contemporary economy. I'm influenced, too, along these lines, by Alessandrea Raengo and Alexander Weheliye's work on race and the intersections between the human and non-human. In *Habeas Viscus*, Weheliye draws on black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers' notion of "pornotroping," tracing the origins of "*porno*" from the Greek term for female slaves sold for prostitution through a long history of fetishized spectacles of the tortured black body. He writes, in language not dissimilar to Klossowski's,

> "The violence inflicted upon the enslaved body becomes synonymous with the projected surplus pleasure that always already moves in excess of the sovereign subject's *jouissance*."[8]



Samantha, the operating system in *Her* (2013) is fleshed out through Johansson's bodiless voice.

Raengo's discussion of blackness and principles of visibility tied to the commodity form is also particularly salient here as well. She draws on the same Walter Benjamin quote that guides my query in this paper to ask, as she puts it, what face the commodity puts on, what sits on its surface.[9]

I would suggest that it is no accident that several of the themes this dossier grapples with coincide with the two primary examples of living currency: the slave and the prostitute. Blackness and femininity haunt this boundary between the human and the nonhuman, and are core to the myriad and often violent exchanges that take place there. I would argue that the complex traffic in objects



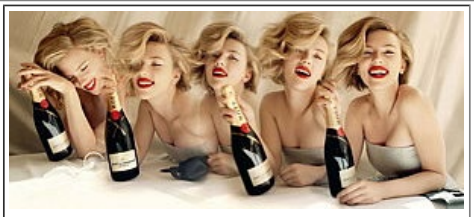
Johansson's visceral transformation into a data drive in *Lucy* (2014).

in which we find ourselves currently circulating cannot be understood without fully considering the ways in which particular forms of difference are foundational to that economy, an economy that is founded on the circulation of all kinds of bodies, with dire repercussions that are not limited to the realm of the human.[10]

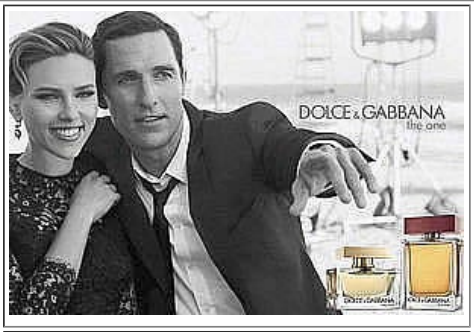
Hence my fascination with the assemblage Scarlett Johansson that puts her face, her voice, and her brand in dialogue with a series of cinematic objects and surfaces. This includes her performance in *Under the Skin* as well as her star turn in Spike Jonze's aptly named *Her*. There, Johansson never appears, but her voice provides the aural interface of a sophisticated, personalize operating system; her vocal self is warm, round, raspy, halting, overflowing from the outset with a flirtatious humor at once seductive and suspiciously canned.[11] She is a placeholder, a sonic "absent one" that no longer limits itself to directing our gaze; it seduces us, organizes our data files, plans our appointments, rewrites our virtual selves. The notion of ScarJo as vehicle, however, reaches its most absurd heights in Luc Besson's *Lucy*. Here her character is kidnapped and forced to take a job as a drug mule, surgically implanted with a sack of mind-expanding narcotics synthesized from the hormones released by women during pregnancy. The drug packet bursts, and Johansson evolves into a superhuman able to utilize nearly all of her brain capacity, with beneficial side-effects including the able to heal herself, to shoot like an expert marksman, and to have a fan always blowing her hair while engaging in battle. She is literally a vehicle for a product, she is a scientific specimen, an instrument of vengeance, and a vessel for data. In the climax of the film, her body undergoes a strange, black, liquification process via which she transforms her body and brain into a USB thumb drive, a ludicrously quaint and backwards compatible holder for all of human scientific knowledge, if human beings could, like her, overcome their humanness.



New York Times Crossword Puzzle solution, Sunday March 15, 2015, by Dan Feyer.



Johansson replicates herself for Moët & Chandon (2011).



Martin Scorsese directed a short film, "The Street of Dreams" (2013), starring Johansson and Matthew McConaughey, which is also an advertisement for the Dolce & Gabbana fragrance, "The One."





Johansson began working for the humanitarian organization Oxfam International in 2005, and served as Global Ambassador from 2007-2014.	As Oxfam ambassador, Johansson was photographed visiting the Dadaab Camp for Somali refugees in Kenya (2011).
	
Johansson as featured on SodaStream's Facebook page.	Activist groups circulated altered images of Johansson's SodaStream campaign, in protest of the Israeli company's manufacturing practices in the occupied West Bank. Oxfam dropped Johansson as a spokesfigure in the wake of the controversy (Image: Stephanie Westbrook, January 2014).



The alien looks herself in the face.

It is hard to contemplate the entity that is ScarJo outside the realm of the commodity. She is a spokesface, capable of selling champagne, and advancing the agenda of an antipoverty NGO confederation, at least until her affiliation with another brand interjected her into political theater. Scarjo, a moniker that Johansson herself loathes, is a loose signifier, a *NY Times* crossword puzzle answer, a face, a function.

Across these forums, we can trace strange correlations that cannot be attributed to a singular intentionality or agent. The eternal return. The living commodity attempts to look itself in the face, it contemplates its past, it writes its name, but finds in the refractions only a slick surface, no point of origin, a simulacrum, endlessly circulating.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. Michel Faber, *Under the Skin* (New York: Harvest, 2000). The alien in Faber's novel is given a name, Isserly, and the third-person narration hews closely to her perspective, offering detailed insight into her history and inner life. Readers are given full access, too, to the messy work performed on the human subjects in the Processing Hall. [return to text]

2. Ara Osterweil, *Film Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (Summer 2014): 47.

3. Pierre Klossowski, *La Monnaie vivante*, photographs by Pierre Zucca (Paris: Eric Losfeld Editeur, 1970), n.p.. Jordan Levinson's English translation of the text (which I have adapted here) is published online: Klossowski, "Living Currency," trans. Jordan Levinson, <http://anticoncept.phpnet.us/Livingcurrency.htm>. A new translation of the work is forthcoming: Klossowski, *Living Currency*, trans. Vernon W. Cisney, Daniel W. Smith, and Nicolae Morar (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017).

4. I am indebted to Eleanor Kaufman's extensive and insightful analysis of this text in *The Derlirium of Praise: Bataille, Blanchot, Deleuze, Foucault, Klossowski* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 111-129.

5. I discuss Klossowski's work, and the passages on "industrial slaves" in particular, in a different context in "Architectures of Exchange: Feminism, Public Space, and the Politics of Vulnerability," *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 66-94.

6. Klossowski, *La Monnaie vivante*, n.p., and Levinson's translation.

7. Deleuze reflects on the concept of the body without organs, a body or assemblage that lacks an organizing structure: "It goes without saying that one never finds oneself facing anything but mixtures.... [W]hen we spoke at length of the body without organs, and the necessity of making ourselves one, I never thought that one could live without the organism... because subjectivation, organism, pulsation of time, these are the conditions of living. If one leaps over that, it's what we call a suicide." Gilles Deleuze, "Sur la musique," transcription of a seminar on *Anti Oedipe et Mille Plateaux*at the University of Vincennes, 3 May 1977, trans. Timothy S. Murphy. Both the original and translated versions available under *Les Cours de Gilles Deleuze*, "Anti Oedipe et Mille Plateaux" at <http://www.webdeleuze.com/php/sommaire.html>.

8. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2014), 91.

9. Alessandra Raengo, "Optic Black: Blackness as Phantasmagoria," in Akil Houston, ed., *Beyond Blackface: Africana Images in the US Media*, 3rd ed. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 2010), 160. Benjamin's formulation of the prostitute in relation to modernity and capital almost certainly had a direct influence on Klossowski's living currency, as Klossowski was Benjamin's first

French translator, and he and Benjamin engaged in heated debates in several shared intellectual forums in Paris. See Pierre Klossowski, "Letter on Walter Benjamin," trans. by Christian Hite, *Parrhesia* 19 (2014): 14-21.

10. An expanded notion of bodies and actants allows us to see the heavy burdens borne by certain classes of human and animal bodies in our current economic markets, as well as the cascading impact of these transactions on other ecological, technological, and sentient bodies. See, for example, Lisa Nakamura's work on the history of computer chip manufacturing using Navaho women laborers. Nakamura, "Indigenous Circuits: Navajo Women and the Racialization of Early Electronic Manufacture," *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (December, 2014): 919-941.

11. For New York City public radio audiences, Johansson's voice is a ubiquitous presence, periodically interrupting the programming to remind us to "just keep listening." See WNYC's Tumbler account, <http://wnyc.tumblr.com/post/110551638148/who-are-the-two-female-voices-that-do-the-keep>.

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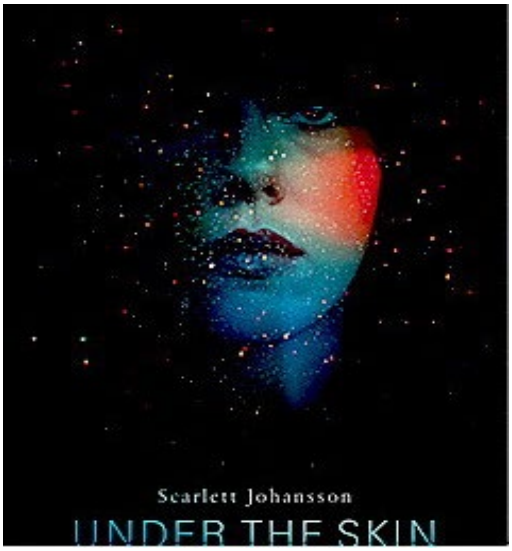
JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Splitting the difference: on the queer-feminist divide in Scarlett Johansson's recent body politics



Johansson's body merges with technoscience in her recent cyborgian roles

By Marc Francis





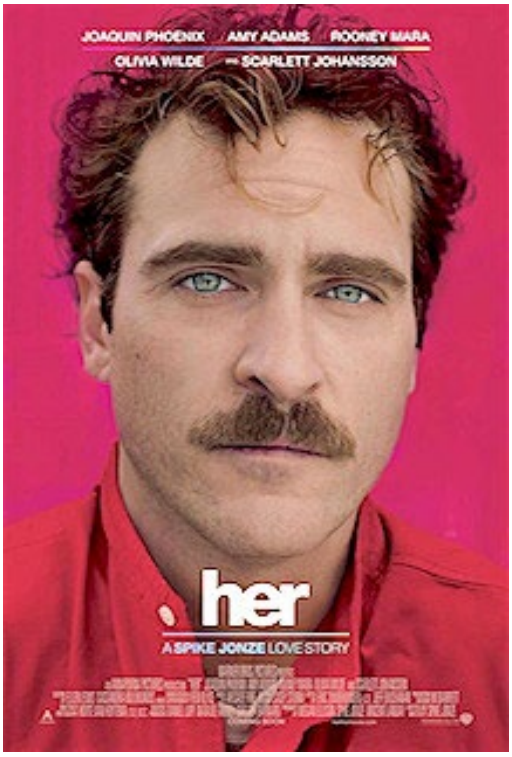
For many, Scarlett Johansson's recent career choices seem obviously "cyborgian." Johansson's body in *Lucy*, *Under the Skin*, and *Her* undergoes technological or scientific metamorphoses that are deeply enmeshed in governing cybernetic or biochemical networks. This fact alone echoes what Donna Haraway called in her now famous 1985 essay, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," a figure "simultaneously animal and machine."[1] [open notes in new window] Given that Haraway describes the cyborg as a "creature in a post-gender world," one might be tempted to say that, in retrospect, the cyborg appears as queer as it does feminist in Haraway's writing.[2] In an implicit move to de-naturalize gender, Haraway writes that the cyborg is,

> "not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generates antagonistic dualisms without end."[3]

What makes Scarlett Johansson's "body trilogy" (as I am calling it here) so interesting is, in part, its ability to break from gendered notions of innocence, and its refusal of a system of gender and sexual binaries. How then does Johansson—as undeniably feminized human star *and* elusive cyborg—complicate attempts to claim the cyborg's symbolic meanings as both queer *and* feminist?

If the figure of the cyborg, more than thirty years after Haraway's prescient thesis, is still laden with contradiction (it belongs to no one and has equal potential to be used as a force of oppression or disobedience), consider what weight this bears on the queer and feminist theories that confront the question of embodiment within a so-called posthuman world. Given this problematic, it is tempting to address what Robyn Wiegman in *Object Lessons* frames as the "discordant temporalities" within which queer and feminist theory "diverge" from one another. With Scarlett Johansson—a star who appears to marshal these many discourses—as guide, I want to trace how the figure of the cyborg in Johansson's films, as a signifier for systems of capitalist-patriarchal domination *as well as* their breaks, may supply important tools for framing the relationship between current queer and feminist discursive formations.

As I move among the modes of disembodiment (*Her*), split-embodiment (*Under the Skin*), and hyper-embodiment (*Lucy*) in Scarlett Johansson's films, I will offer up multiple readings that correspond with varying modes of critique without committing to one over the others. My aim here is not to negotiate the terms of queerness and feminism—sometimes operating coextensively or collaboratively and other times contentiously against one another—rather it is to pinpoint the discursive implications of their limits and openings. In this sense, I depart from



The body trilogy: *Under the Skin*, *Lucy*, *Her*

more conventional star studies that allegorize the star in order to explain larger cultural phenomena that either affirm or trouble a supposed zeitgeist. Instead, I regard her more as paradigmatic of knowledge production both within the academy and without. I see Johansson as not so much a vehicle or vessel but as a *compass* orienting us toward tough questions in which we may be invested: What is the future of feminist critique of mainstream and independent cinema? Does it necessarily correlate with that of queer critique? Or does queer criticism—as stemming from feminist concerns of gender construction—do enough to cover its feminist bases, free now to independently roam and explore the open and shifting landscape of sexuality?[4] My hope is that these questions will also uncover ways to critically think and feel through the potential impasses and aporia produced by the trendy so-called "posts" in critical theory—whether postfeminist, postmodernist, posthumanist, or postgender.

In an age where "gender studies" has begun to supplant "women's studies" on campuses across the country (and other parts of the world), and queer becomes a chosen identity over gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (among others), we may wonder, along with Robyn Wiegman, why queer theory seems to be biting the proverbial hand that feeds it. What has created the rift between queer theory and feminism that legal theorist Janet Halley persuasively locates in her book *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism*?[5] It is within the figure of Scarlett Johansson—tracked through the body trilogy—that I situate this *ostensible* divergence. Throughout this essay, I will demonstrate how Johansson's body, on the one hand, queered through abstraction, and on the other, objectified and subjugated by misogyny, offers scholars and critics a place to exercise their political desires and concerns. In the end, I will argue that Johansson is emblematic of both the bad and the good—the two sides of the feminist and queer coins—in Haraway's cyborg. That is to say that at the precise moment that one tries to mobilize the body trilogy to critical ends in the name of one discourse, the other seems to push back with diametric oppositional force. More central to my point, though, is that her critics seem poised to negotiate, claim/reclaim, or repudiate the figure of the cyborg when it would seem most beneficial to retain its contradictory valences. My argument is not that we simply "be of two minds about it," but that we address and sit with rather than circumnavigate the ostensible split Johansson's body politics incite.



Split embodiment in *Under the Skin*, ...



.... hyper-embodiment in *Lucy*, ...



.... disembodiment in *Her*





Johansson “cruises” in *Under the Skin*

Since the 1990s, women’s and gender studies programs have often incorporated and cultivated queer theoretical, philosophical, and social aims, perhaps unsurprisingly because these departments became the primary academic sites for studying gender and sexuality. In fact, one might be hard-pressed to find a women’s and/or gender studies department that does *not* today offer classes in queer theory. So is the suggestion here that to do “good” feminist critique nowadays one must also attend to the queer, noting sexual and gender ambiguities, transgressions, and overall challenges to existing norms? If queer theory builds upon feminism, expanding its scope through varying concerns, objects, discourses, and subject positions, perhaps we have come to a point where the discursive borders are not so easy to locate. I am reminded here of what Jane Gaines once wrote:

> “queer theory is not antithetical to feminism because feminism is a kind of base line for it. Neither is queer theory just one of the many feminisms. Queer theory is feminism and more.”[6]

Though Gaines’ description seems quite apt of the turn towards queer in 1990s cultural studies, Scarlett Johansson, whether we like or not, has come to embody, or *dis*embody, precisely what I would like to call this “crisis of attribution” in the current sociopolitical and academic climate.

Under the Skin, a film in which Johansson plays an alien who is programmed to seduce and abduct men in order to procure their skin for her species (the exact reason remaining unknown), has been both lauded and criticized for its relationship to gender and sexuality. Ara Osterweil comments that the film is “one of the most important feminist interventions in recent cinematic history.”[7] She praises the film for advancing a “radical proposition: to be female is to be alien.” Though Johansson clearly signifies a feminine form, the film’s empowering capabilities, for Osterweil, lie in the alien’s penchant for looking, gazing, or “cruising” the physical world without being fully acculturated into it. Her alienness frees her of the normative protocol assigned to women as eroticized specimens and not *eroticizing* agents. The tragedy that ensues in the film, Osterweil notes, stems from her external marking as female despite an internal alienness. The misogynist sexual violence inflicted upon Johansson’s body is a manifestation of her punishment for asserting sexual agency forbidden in a male-dominated world.



The alien/cyborg is sexually assaulted in *Under the Skin*.



Incommensurable bodies in *Under the Skin*

But where Osterweil seems to see a somewhat fluid, albeit belated, process of self-discovery on the part of the alien-becoming-sentient, I see a marked incommensurability between the figure’s two forms of embodiment throughout the film: the human pathos on the one hand and social alterity on the other; the two almost meet but they never do completely. This is best exemplified in the film’s ending, when the alien looks at herself in these two forms. Staring into each

other's "faces," the black body that lay underneath the skin the whole time conveys no legible affect while tears stream down Johansson's face. The eyes of the mask that is Johansson's face even blink to remind us that the human component to this alien can be shed but not so easily annihilated—it exists independently of the body that wears it. The violence inflicted upon first Johansson's body and then the alien's body may seem continuous in that the perpetrator's anger arises from his perceived deception; the targeted and essentialized woman, in such an allegorical reading, *is* the Other that lacks signification. Yet this bodily split—between the endoskeleton and dermis—could be seen in some ways as a separation of femininity from the body, or feminism from queer theory, for that matter. This scene seems to transform violence against a woman's body into violence against the queer body—genderless, affectless, and indecipherable. In the end, perhaps there is both continuity *and* discontinuity within the logic of this violent act against the split body.







Lucy's phallic powers?

Further, the alien does not undergo any fluid process of "becoming" human, and even less so "becoming" woman, in its simulated form or otherwise. Even if there was only a Deleuzian "assemblage" of self—with heterogeneous parts that nonetheless communicate to one other—only a "*dis*assemblage" is reached, revealing that the appearance of any self, coherent or otherwise, was nothing but an illusion in the first place. Donna Haraway's interest in the image of the cyborg intersects here as she illustrates the cyborg's ability to disrupt humanist ideals of wholeness and completion. Finding a way to celebrate a *certain* use of the cyborg, Haraway writes that they are "not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."[8] Posthumanists have picked up on Haraway's ability to elucidate cogently the machine-organism hybridity that is at play within modernity and into the digital era, but what is even more intriguing here is her invocation of the "partial." The "partial" is not just about hybridity or a kind of yoking but about the pieces, the fractions, the fragments, the particles that do not yield a system of unity through normative aspirations. The partial in Haraway's terms simultaneously invokes *ex*traction and *ab*straction. From the Latin meaning "drawn away," Haraway's *abstract* cyborg does not *withdraw* from discourse: it is abstract because it lacks fidelity to a dream of full recognition, theoretical, rhetorical, experiential, and perhaps even visual.

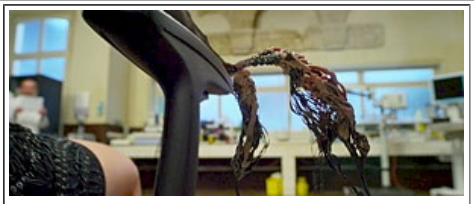
One drawback is that Haraway's theory, at least in the "Cyborg Manifesto," does





Lucy transitions from omniscience to omnipresence.

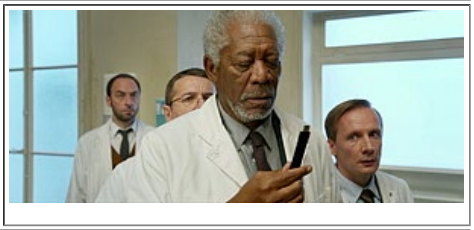
not describe how an affirmative version of the cyborg (as infused with feminist-socialist thought) might decenter the visualized signifier of the female body. If bodily objectification is, as it was with many feminist film theorists of the 1970s and 1980s, still one of the most fundamental and persistent feminist concerns within the field of vision, its need for destabilization requires revisitation.[9] Both *Under the Skin* and *Lucy* remind viewers of the historical violence against women's bodies that much feminist activism and critique has labored to eradicate. The body, in these feminist theories as well as in moments in the films, is not abstract at all but a tangible facet of the world that necessitates protection and rights. In *Under the Skin*, the scene of near-rape is shot and edited in a disturbingly vivid manner, ending with the alien being immolated by her rapist. Though the near-rape in *Lucy* is not treated with such severity, it becomes a moment—in line with what has been identified as a "rape revenge" mode—to reverse the attempted rape by killing her perpetrators. In fact, the film is full of reversals, to the point where a psychoanalyst might say Lucy seizes phallic powers that then ultimately guide her to omnipotence. Take, for example, the scene when Lucy pays a visit to the drug lord that implanted the power-inducing drug in her body. Now having reached new levels of dexterity, Lucy stabs the drug lord in his hands with her two knives.





Lucy's body diffracts or disperses throughout space and time.





Lucy downloads her observations to a flash drive.

Subsequently, Lucy's body—though seemingly superhuman—begins to lose its form altogether. It is undeniable that Lucy is in the process of "unbecoming" human by turning into matter itself. In her brain's quest for "full capacity," Lucy's body is becoming omnipresent as it becomes abstract—dispersing or, to use the language of feminist and queer science scholar Karen Barad, "diffracting," throughout space and time. Her body's permeation of all matter thus is not an abstraction that seeks partiality but *totality*.[10] Departing from a reading that might align with Haraway's claims, a feminist *and* queer argument in favor of the ending could be found within its provocation: imagine the feminine pervading spaces in a male supremacist world (the setting as a laboratory full of male scientists serving as an excellent reminder). The queer gesture then might lie in its ability to extend the possibilities of gender into a dematerialized form beyond the field of vision. What happens when the cyborg is not even detectable to human perception?



Right when *Lucy* seems to conclude on a potentially radical and transgressive note, aporia arrives with the close-up of a good old-fashioned flash drive, phallic



Johansson's body becoming black in *Lucy* and *Under the Skin*.



Johansson as the black widow in *The Avengers*.





Johansson as the "aural object" in *Her*. She is literally in his pocket.

in shape, where Lucy has supposedly downloaded all her observations and calculations. Quite a small device for a woman who has overcome the divisions of space and time. But even before this, we might wonder, as Lucy's body alters into a black liquid and snake-like consistency in the laboratory, what is the meaning of Lucy's transmutation into blackness? Her new form seems to connote void, absence, unknowability and contingency all at the same time, confirming what many critical race theorists of the moving image have been able to expose of cinema's at-times racialized formal attributes.[11] How does Johansson's repeated resignification in all three films—in *Her* with a fade to black upon her cyborgian orgasm, and in *Lucy* and *Under the Skin* with a metamorphosis into or reveal of black matter—trade on racialized knowledges as a way to unmoor the white body from situated limitations within white feminist and queer discourses?[12]

Though this essay does not seek to confront this worrisome dilemma, still, I reinforce that these films may not be ready to lead us into the queer-feminist posthuman utopia that Haraway's affirmative version of the cyborg gives us glimpses into. Leaving aside the question of black appropriation, there are also warranted—albeit more generic—feminist critiques of Johansson's choices that expose her inability to transcend a sex symbol iconography. Given her role as the vamp in *Match Point* or as a tight-leather-suit wearing action hero in *The Avengers*, it is hard to ignore the types of roles that shape her star persona. Even in a film like *Her*, where Johansson is seemingly *dis*embodied—pared down to a Siri-like voice—she is still sexualized.





Johansson as the neurotic vamp in *Match Point*

New York Magazine's blog, *Vulture*, noted that the role of Samantha, the operating system with which Joaquin Phoenix's character falls in love, was originally assigned to Samantha Morton. Spike Jonze, the film's director, commented that once working on the film, "the team" "realized that what the character/movie needed was different" from what Morton and Jonze had created together. *Vulture* writer Mark Harris went on to comment that, "whereas Morton could sound maternal, loving, vaguely British, and almost ghostly, Johansson plays the role as younger, more impassioned, and with more yearning."[13] Johansson as the Eve Harrington and Morton the Margo Channing, the sexist modalities of casting and re-casting based on appeals to mass consumption play out seamlessly in this example. Here voice is literally Christian Metz's "aural object," a sound that cannot be extracted from its source.[14] Still, do we negotiate all the queer possibilities that *Her* cultivates? We find out towards the end that Samantha is in love with 641 people besides our protagonist—a number that Joaquin Phoenix's character cannot even begin to compute. What then is said about the tired state of monogamy and intimacy in an age where technological change might expand queer potential?





Something queer about Samantha's 641 romantic partners.

In an article in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Sophia Nguyen repudiates such a fantasy. She describes Johansson as a "product of a collective daydream."[15] Noting the actress repeatedly plays "directionless 'artistic' souls," Nguyen argues that Johansson performs more from a place of curiosity over passion that continually diminishes opportunities for female agency. "Hence," Nguyen writes, "those perpetually parted lips—waiting to be discovered, to be fulfilled." Instead of applauding the ending of *Under the Skin* as a feminist intervention as Osterweil does, Nguyen describes a character who "gropes blindly in the air, rather than fully extending, and grasping." And it also seems hard to ignore the extent to which we still spend so much time—as we once did in *Lost in Translation*—quietly gazing at Johansson's exhibited and sometimes exposed body in *Under the Skin*. Watching her as she drives through the Glasgow streets, getting glimpses of her almost nude body as she seduces her soon-to-be male carcasses, I cannot help but wonder why we might think it odd that she is objectified at the same time that she is allowed to transgress gender expectations: this dilemma seems like nothing new. This kind of impasse lies at heart of so-called "postfeminism," but we might also see it as a queer-feminist mismatch, an incommensurability that either recasts feminism as backwards, as it is in Janet Halley's view—with the signifier "woman" presupposed to be subordinate—or queer as excusing female objectification for the sake of encouraging new paths for unruly modes of desire and pleasure.





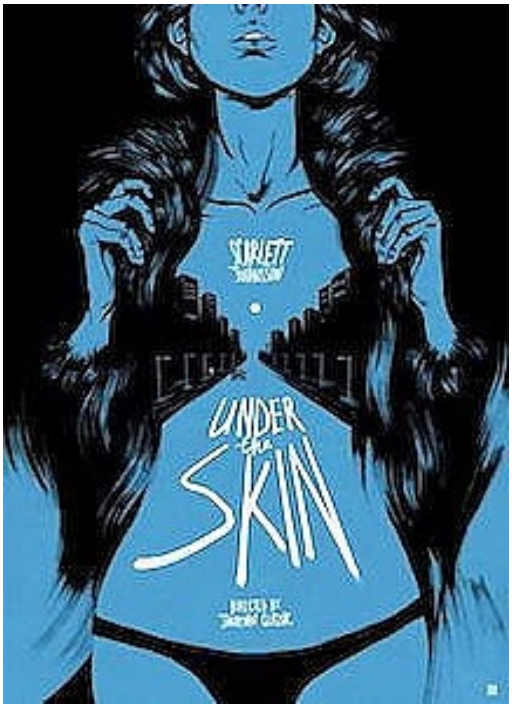
The alien/cyborg seducing her victims in *Under the Skin*.

However, to pit one discourse against the other—though it seems viable enough—may be insufficient. Robyn Wiegman frames this issue as one of "disciplinary regeneration"—the seeming divergence or splintering off of discourses—in which we embrace the illusion that we have left behind established methodologies and epistemologies in pursuit of new ones. "The problem is not what we cling to," Wiegman writes, "but the way we convince ourselves that we don't."[16] Wiegman's intervention is aimed at several theorists as she moves across cultural studies in her book *Object Lessons*. In one particular chapter, though, she is concerned with Janet Halley's proclamation that maybe—just maybe—it is time to "take a break from feminism." Halley wishes to see how queer theory might help us reimagine desire free of feminist knee-jerk reactions against more anarchic pursuits of pleasure.[17] For Halley, feminism cannot shed the influence of the Catherine MacKinnon logic that many propagated especially in the 1980s; this stance was (or still *is*) poised to essentialize female sexual victimization and subordination as *the* feminist issue. For Wiegman, though, feminism is far too slippery of a signifier to warrant such a provocation. It resists singular narration and definition, and therefore Halley's claim appears to lose its footing. In fact, though Wiegman does not come right out and say it, I would argue that Haraway's feminist *and* queer cyborg manifesto precisely befits Halley's dream—and it does so by way of critiquing Catherine MacKinnon for her "totalizing" theory as well![18]

Halley welcomes a more reparative pursuit or approach to the politics of sexuality that would advance "irrational" queer desire "in love with the edge," expressing "contempt for the average, the everyday, the reassuringly persistent."[19]



Johansson's nude body in the red light — defamiliarizing or all too familiar?

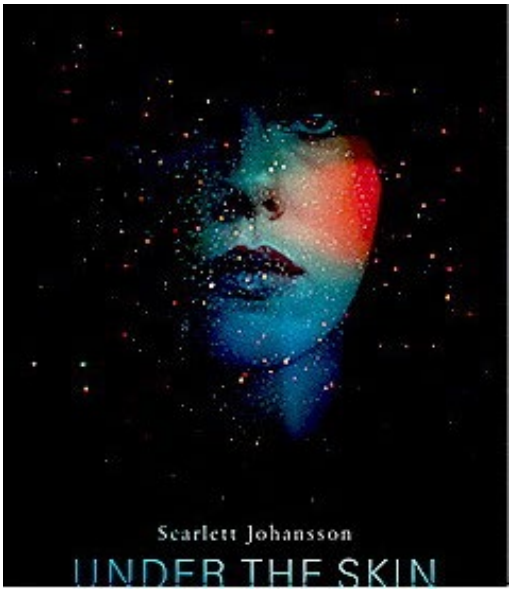


Fan art for *Under the Skin* emphasizing the alien/cyborg body.

Wiegman is skeptical of such "divergentist" optimism. For her, this effort constitutes a kind of ironic "convergence" or reconsolidation of identity knowledges "into some form of sameness [that] is the necessary move to generate difference."[20] On the one hand, queer theory might proceed with "taking a break from feminism" in the hopes of being more "deconstructive" and "playful," and where it can, exploiting and converting the operations of sexual othering to more fruitful and reparative ends. On the other hand, queer theory might crucially miss all the moments that feminism has diverged from itself, critically, socially, and institutionally. Feminism in these moments, Wiegman seems to argue, announces its own instability and fragmentation, and moreover, it could serve as illuminating fodder for queer theory's varying social imaginaries. For me, Scarlett Johansson's body trilogy occupies precisely this nodal point where queer theory and feminism might diverge *but* where they also might cross into one another, where they might diverge from themselves and create *new* convergences, ones that I myself as a pupil of reigning definitions of feminism and queer theory might not even be able to see. While the body trilogy appears to invite opposing reading practices, in actuality, it invokes a history of crossed genealogies, mixed traditions, and confused borders. Feminism could look awfully queer in readings such as Ara Osterweil's of *Under the Skin*, or it might not, just as queer can take with it the best lessons of feminism, or again, leave some of them behind.[21] My point here is that attributing ideation to particular critical discourses--especially when their genealogies are interwoven--is itself a politically fraught endeavor that might be best handled with self-reflection and even uncertainty.

The cyborg depicted in *Her*, *Under the Skin*, and *Lucy* may be received, to quote Haraway, without inherent "celebration nor condemnation" but as a framework to think critically about the social, the scientific, the visual, and the discursive alongside one another.[22] In the films' gesture towards abstracting the female form, we may be better off putting aside the politics of reclamation and negotiation, to instead reflect on the feminist or queer political desires or fears that these films might tap into. Utopian or realistic as they may be, Wiegman argues, these desires remain tethered to identity knowledges.[23] I would like us then to consider, in closing, what it would mean to put our divergences aside for a moment, to explore where desires for wholeness *or* partiality might lead us, not by effacing our identities but by critically occupying them.

And then there is the issue of Scarlett Johansson more specifically. In his crucial writing on film stars, Richard Dyer has explicated the affective and ideological paradoxes that emerge from star adoration within a capitalist cultural logic. They are commodity forms, Dyer tells us, yes, but they are also projections of spectators' complex and lived desires. Or in less psychoanalytic terms, stars represent the open horizon on which spectators' desires might be invited to play out, for better and for worse.[24] Scarlett Johansson can be understood as a site of heterosexual male fantasy, one that visual studies has deemed dubious at best, and yet her body trilogy is also one where (dis)embodiment does more than connote subjugation. It jettisons naturalized figurations of femininity and fashions decidedly inhuman and cyborgian characteristics into more questionable and at times painfully unknowable forms. This is precisely why Osterweil and others embrace her alien ontology in pursuit of new feminist pathways. However, this avowal and alignment can happen only so seamlessly because those political desires might be arduous to name; it might be difficult for them to find discursive refuge when they get into trouble. Again, I am not suggesting we commit to one



How do you solve a problem like Johansson?

course over the other, as Halley encourages us to do. Rather I propose that we attend to both the fissures and blurred boundaries that keep our disciplinary hopes alive, even when we are uncomfortable to do so, even when this causes us to disclose our own confusion or ambivalence.

While mindful of the pitfalls that might dog attempts to diverge from a prevailing epistemological framework, still, I would like to reorient myself away from those familiar tensions on which star studies turn (e.g. private/public, individuality/commodity, genuine/constructed self) to envisage instead the star as embodying schisms in critical intellectual thought and even politically-inflected cultural production at large. The star here serves as a site of sociopolitical desires that might continually shuttle between the fantasy of emancipatory potential and the suspicion that its exploitation lurks just around the corner. Is this not the painful but rehearsed reality that manifests itself when one attempts to frame a star's narrative by way of recuperative practices? It is an impasse that many film and media scholars who study stars know all too well. Donna Haraway and Robyn Wiegman might therefore encourage us to relinquish those dreams and anxieties of wholeness and unity that tend to be the source of the problem and that, as it turns out, undergird a substantial amount of critical theory. Haraway and Wiegman respectively demonstrate that cyborgs, disciplines, and discourses are all fragmentary, heterogeneous, contradictory, insubordinate, and (mostly) free of inherence. We might do well for ourselves to take heed of this axiom. And yet still I sit here with the pieces, taking stock of the body trilogy, waiting and hoping for Johansson to point me in at least some direction.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

A special thank you to my advisor, B. Ruby Rich, for coaching me through several iterations of this piece. I am also grateful for the enlightening conversations I had with Linnea Hussein and Lara Mimosa Montes.

1. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *Feminism/Postfeminism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 191. [return to text]

2. Haraway somewhat indirectly refers to the cyborg as queer in her 2003 book *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press). She writes, "I have come to see cyborgs as junior siblings in the much bigger, queer family of companion species, in which reproductive biotechnopolitics are generally a surprise, sometimes even a nice surprise" (11).

3. Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 222.

4. Queer theory could not have formed without the influence of gay and lesbian scholars of the 1980s who produced histories and theories of homosexuality more often than not to naturalize it and portray it as a transhistorical and cross-cultural phenomenon. The late 1980s and early 1990s writing of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler marked a decided turn in the study of sexuality with the import of a largely Foucauldian methodology, enabling the field to acknowledge the interplays of power that informed sexuality's historical contingencies and epistemologies. Even though these new queer theories picked up the historical paradigms of homosexuality that had been studied throughout the previous decade, and *even though* lesbian and gay studies as a field was later subsumed under queer studies, feminist interest in the constructedness—*the paradigmatic structuring*—of sexual and gender categories undergirds queer theory's ontology. In other words, I would argue that feminist theory shepherded or marshaled queer theory in a way that overshadows gay and lesbian studies still indelible contribution.

5. See Janet Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). Halley takes stock of, for example, Leo Bersani and Eve Sedgwick's queer theories to reveal their paradigmatic breaks with feminist logics.

6. Jane Gaines, "Queering Feminist Film Theory." *Jump Cut* no. 41 (May 1997): 45-48.

7. Ara Osterweil, "*Under the Skin*: The Perils of Becoming Female." *Film Quarterly*
vol. 67, no. 4 (Summer 2014), 45.

8. Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," 196.

9. Haraway mentions the issue of objectification when she paraphrases Catherine MacKinnon's theory. Summarizing MacKinnon, Haraway writes that, "in the realm of knowledge, the result of sexual objectification is illusion and abstraction" (201). Haraway is opposed to thinking of women through merely lack, nonexistence, and/or erasure as they are understood in MacKinnon's and countless other feminists' episteme. Haraway's implication is that there is other work to be done on rethinking the category of "woman" itself than MacKinnon's emphasis on censorship and legal restraint allows.

10. See Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences* vol. 19, no. 2 (Spring Spring/Summer 2011), 121-158.

11. For an excellent activation of this work, see David Marriott's essay "Waiting to Fall" (*CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 13, no. 3, Winter 2013, 163-240). See also the work of the Liquid Blackness Research Group: http://liquidblackness.com/.

12. For more on blackness and *Under the Skin*, see Lucas Hildebrand's essay in this dossier.

13. Mark Harris, "Him and *Her*: How Spike Jonze Made the Weirdest, Most Timely Romance of the Year" *Vulture* (blog), *New York Magazine*. October 6, 2013. http://www.vulture.com/2013/10/spike-jonze-on-making-her.html.

14. Christian Metz, "Aural Objects." *Yale French Studies*, no. 60, 1980. Yale University Press: 24–32.

15. Sophia Nguyen, "The Posthuman Scar-Jo," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 12, 2014, https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/posthuman-scar-jo.

16. Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 125.

17. What does Halley say about "postfeminism"? She writes in *Split Decisions* that, "Within left/progressive theory and politics on sexuality, the fact of conflict among the various constituencies and understandings and aims of the Left has been experienced as a *problem*. In particular it is understood to be a problem for feminism, because feminists facing the challenge of 'postfeminism' so often insist that there are only two possible outcomes: either feminism is reinstated as the pervasive ground commitment of *all* left sexuality projects, or it is buried alive. To say that there is something other than feminism is to say that feminism is dead, post, over" (11-12).

18. Wiegman's engagement with the "Cyborg Manifesto" two chapters later is congruent with, in fact, corresponds quite well with her critique of Halley (244-245).

19. Halley, *Split Decisions,* 114.

20. Halley, *Split Decisions*, 122.

21. I think it is time for the field to take an inventory of the self-described feminist film theory that reads as unavoidably queer despite its seeming distance from lesbian desire or female homosexuality. I am thinking especially of Miriam Hansen's essay "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship" (*Cinema Journal*, vol. 25 no. 4 [Summer 1986], 6-32), or better yet, Jane Gaines' "Feminist Heterosexuality and Its Politically Incorrect Pleasures," (*Critical Inquiry*, vol 21 no. 2 [Winter 1995], 382-410) where she

provocatively hypothesizes throughout that, “perhaps the more generous feminism we need is not feminism at all but queer theory” (404).

22. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2007), 4.

23. Halley is, one could argue, quite forthcoming about her allegiances and identifications. In an especially disarming moment, she admits, “I am a sex-positive postmodernist, only rarely and intermittently feminist, a skeptic about identity politics, with a strong attraction to ‘queer’ revelations of the strangeness and unknowability of social and sexual life, and a deep distrust of slave-moralistic pretensions to identity-political ‘powerlessness’” (15). Despite my sympathies (perhaps empathies?) with Halley, I agree with Wiegman that Halley continually resorts to throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater; it is part and parcel of her polemical strategy to reduce varied feminist aims and genealogies.

24. In the introduction of *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (Second Edition) (New York: Routledge, 2004), Dyer writes about star image generation that, “audiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them” (4).

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Independence and the consent of the governed: the systems and scales of *Under the Skin*

by J.D. Connor



The first victim is carried to the white van.



Looking for meat, Johansson in her white van is being passed by another white van (the trail van?).



A later victim hesitates before entering Johansson's grim house, snapping his head around to try to make sense of this white van woman.

It is hard to make sense of the global system of independent motion picture production. On the one hand, each movie originates as its own unlikely case, produced for reasons that might range from the merely personal to the politically sincere to the baldly mercenary, a range that seems far less constrained than the return-on-investment calculations behind major studio moviemaking. On the other hand, despite this mountain of contingency, films are made within a system that seems to have general contours. Most independent filmmakers simply confront this scalar incoherence as a given; they have enough trouble making it into production and finding distribution. But for a select few, the difficulty in making sense of the general enterprise of independent cinema serves as a tangible problem that they aspire to solve, and in that aspiration, they might make a case for the centrality of independent production to the global creative economy more generally.

Under the Skin's swift canonization makes this film an ideal case study through which to examine the international interstices, overlapping temporalities, and mediating institutions that compose independent moviemaking in general. My analysis grounds itself in three allegorical scenes stretching from the social microcosm of the film's actual production to the macrocosm of global film finance. Between them, we find the mesocosm of British production in the long wake of social democracy.

Micro

When a movie as unsettling as *Under the Skin* becomes a cultural touchstone, it is frequently surrounded by behind-the-scenes tales that reassure its audiences that people—perhaps like you and me—made it. This dossier on *Under the Skin* presents three such tales. The first, which Amy Herzog analyzes, is Scarlett Johansson's faceplant and its participation in a global star system. The second is about the pause in director Jonathan Glazer's career occasioned by his decade-long effort to adapt the novel. This story revolves around the various "takes" he and his writers worked through, and the epiphany that resulted—still another five years later—in the film narrative we have. I will return to that.

The third story concentrates on the emblem of the production itself: the white van that Johansson drives around Glasgow, searching for "real" interactions, with Glazer and members of the crew hiding in the back. For those working in the van it was, on the one hand, a throwback to a sort of verité guerrilla filmmaking. The process thrilled Glazer:

> "There were times I said to [producer] Jim [Wilson], Let's just dump the last two-thirds of the script and stay in the van. Because I loved the idea of leaving the door open to reality. The surprises. The treasure." (Leigh 2014)

On the other hand, the production process was thoroughly up to date. The van itself was fitted with eight tiny digital cameras—more sophisticated than a GoPro, but small enough to be hidden in air vents or behind the headrests. (Sound was taken in a similar way.)

> "Behind the bulkhead I'd be sitting in a chair and I'd have a monitor with eight images on it from the eight camera feeds. I'd have the DP sitting next to me, two guys doing digital imaging, the first AD and the sound man." (Wiseman, 2014)

The eight cameras generated an enormous amount of footage—editor Paul Watts has said there were 230 hours of material ("Making of" 2014)—a digital mountain more typical of reality television than finely honed cinema. But in that footage lay the authenticity that both vouched for and stood over against the movie's more elliptical aspects.

Part of the reason the van story has proved so compelling is the ludicrous idea of a major star such as Johansson driving around unrecognized (by all accounts she was rarely spotted), picking up men who would only later be told what had happened. But surely part of the story's charge lies in the sheer indie-ness of the scene, the let's-all-put-on-a-show self-reliance—all we need is a star, a bunch of cameras, and reality. Well, that and "a follow-up van, with makeup people and PAs, who had to jump out of the van and get release forms from people that we happened to film," (Wiseman).

It is this follow-up van I want to concentrate on because in the mobile allegory of the film's production, the scene in which PAs scramble for signatures is the moment when filming in the state of nature gets rewritten as a (social) contract. In the first van, Johansson's alien, whom the filmmakers called Laura, is trolling for meat as part of some hard-to-fathom invasion plot. At one level, the production simply duplicates that process, *really* trolling for *real* interactions that it can convert into a movie. But whereas in the script the men who approach Laura are ignorant of her aims, and ignorant still as they descend into the abyssal blackness of her amniotic meat locker before being popped like human balloons filled with blood slurry, the on-the-street Glaswegians who approach the first van become swiftly inducted into the film's mobile polity, consenting to having their images used. This behind-the-scenes story is, as usual, reassuring: no matter how oblivious the folks on the streets of Scotland may seem, the production system ensures that they *will have consented* to their being filmed.[1] [open notes in new window]

That reassuring story is, writ large, one way of reading the film as a whole. In *not* killing The Deformed Man (Adam Pearson) and in agreeing to have sex with The Quiet Man, Laura demonstrates both her recognition that consent is a central form of human interaction and her conviction that she can and should participate in it. But her auto-affective self-realization and ethical development are ultimately cut short when the woodsman attempts to rape her and, discovering the real of her alien blackness, sets her on fire. The distinct parallels between her acts of what looks increasingly like human ethical consideration and the woodsman's horrific violations suggest that the movie is, properly, a tragedy of consent.[2]

Micro to meso to macro

As the example of the follow-on van demonstrates, the links between the narrative of *Under the Skin* and the narrative of its making are (at least) philosophical, ideological, performative, corporeal, and material. The scenes and the behind-the-scenes are bound together by modes of exemplification that range from metonymy to full-on allegory. And the filmmakers' delight in the confusions between the quasi-staged and the quasi-real suggests that one lesson the movie offers them is a plausible resolution to the contradictions at the heart of the independent cinema system in which they find themselves.

One of those contradictions is market restriction. The authenticity that independent cinema depends on risks localizing its appeal. Here again, the image of Johansson in the white van is emblematic. The particular model at the center of this tale is generic enough—a 2006 Mercedes Sprinter, according to the Internet Movie Car Database (imcdb.com). Such white transit vans had been the staple car of the independent skilled trades for decades—the vans came white from the dealer, customizing them was an added expense, and in the end that would only hurt later resale. The ubiquity of the white van helps explain why so few spotted Johansson and why it was possible for a follow-up van to go unnoticed as well. Osterweil considers it a "signal" of Glazer's "political concern with the quotidian," yet it is more than that (46). As ordinary as the van is, it was not Laura's car in the original novel. It was drafted into the project both because it enabled the very specific mode of moviemaking Glazer wanted and because it was freighted with significance, for the white van is an emblem of the New Labour era in British politics.



WHITE VAN MAN

A view of Britain from inside the cab

EVERY Saturday The Sun's White Van Man gives his views on the hot topics of the week in our must-read column.

Today Daniel Nettleton, 23, puts Teletubby Tinky Winky, Valentine's Day and golden oldies Blondie on the spot.

Daniel, of Ealing, west London, drives a white van for Interlink Express couriers. Here he talks to DAVID GARFINKEL.

GIVING YOU A STEER . . .Dan Nettleton behind the wheel of his white van

THE possibility that Teletubby Tinky Winky and other children's TV stars are gay.

WVM: Tinky Winky is as gay as the month of May. But that's no problem, as I find homosexuality a big source of

TODAY'S WHITE VAN MAN IS: Daniel Nettleton, of Ealing, London

aged to forget Valentine's Day for the last three years.

but good luck to her. I used to listen to Blondie in the 1980s

overweight, so why not dogs? If it makes them happy, they should just be allowed to carry on eating

Live And Kicking presenter Jamie Theakston getting a new Radio 1 show.

The "White Van Man," in his (or her) tabloid incarnation appeared Saturdays in *The Sun*. Daniel Nettleton was an early example, opining harmlessly about British football, immigration, Blondie, and a war crimes trial (2/13/99, 8).



WHITE VAN WOMAN

A view of Britain from inside the cab

EVERY Saturday the new voice of Britain, White Van Man, airs his views on the week's news. Today his sister, White Van WOMAN, Adrienne Loades of Ilkeston, Derbys, tackles topics from the Kosovo crisis to Anthea Turner's lovelife.

Mum-of-two Adrienne, 49, a distribution agent for the Ilkeston Express newspaper, drives a 1,000cc Bedford Pascal. Here she talks to TIM SPANTON.

MUM HAS THE LAST WORD . . . Adrienne in the cab of her delivery van

Three Nato soldiers captured by the Serbs.

WVW: It doesn't surprise me at all. The Serbs were bound to retaliate for the bombing – it was just a question of where. The Americans were patrolling on the edge of the war, so they

TODAY'S WHITE VAN WOMAN IS: Adrienne Loades, 49, of Ilkeston, Derbyshire

Keegan's England soccer team in beating Poland 3-1.

WVW: It doesn't interest me. I

Anthea Turner quitting Wish You Were Here? to spend more time with lover Grant Bovey.

shopkeeper who's struggling? Of course it wouldn't. There are a lot of self-employed people who put in very long hours but don't get anywhere near the minimum wage.

They eke out a living while the Government gives away mil-

Adrienne Loades was a rare "White Van Woman." Uninterested in sport, she was asked about corporate bailouts and the Irish peace process (4/3/99, 8).

The figure of the "White Van Man" apparently first appeared on May 18, 1997 in the *Sunday Times*, the same month that Tony Blair and Labour swept into power. Initially characterized as a particularly aggressive driver, White Van Man took on a broader cultural significance as he became a fixture of Sarah Kennedy's Radio 2 morning show (BBC 2001). By 1999 *The Sun* inaugurated a weekly vox-pop column in which a different driver would offer his (or her) political opinions. Wondering what White Van Man might want of the government became as crucial a task for British pundits as divining the beliefs of Soccer Moms and Joe-the-Plumbers would be in the United States.



WHITE VAN MAN

A view of Britain from inside the cab

THE Selby train disaster.

WVM: What a very tragic accident. The chances of everything going wrong as it did were billions to one against.

What surprises me is that the Land Rover driver couldn't stop before reaching the rail line.

I'm not blaming GNER for this accident, but I still do not think trains are safe yet.

There is a long way to go before they get public confidence back. Despite the fact this crash was caused by a road accident, I would still much rather drive.

Horse racing cancelled as foot-and-mouth spreads.

WVM: The racing doesn't bother me but I was well worried the England rugby might be called off.

I thought the Government might be doing more about stopping movement that leads to large numbers of people congregating. But I'm glad England's game has been spared.

Billy Elliot's Jamie Bell, 14, beating Russell Crowe to Bafta.

WVM: It makes a change for a Brit to win something. Even though it is about ballet, my wife wants to see it, so I will go with her.

There was a lot of hype when the film first came out. Now that it has won this

TODAY'S White Van Man is courier Paul Smith, 38, from Milton Keynes, Bucks. Married Paul has three daughters and drives an Astra 1.8. He is talking to TIM SPANTON.

are so many children waiting to be adopted here? The American couple shouldn't be allowed to adopt the girls with this hanging over the husband.

wife is a primary school teacher. But I think it **WOULD** be right to deduct pay from poorly performing teachers, like Chris Woodhead says.

in our pockets, but there just isn't room for British tax cuts.

England's 3-0 win over Spain at soccer.

WVM: I prefer rugby to what I call kids' football, but I did watch the highlights. England played all right apart from the first half hour.

Anyway, what people will remember is the 3-0 scoreline. Not everyone was keen on having Sven Goran Eriksson as manager, but this was a good result for Johnny Foreigner.

Craig David missing out at the Brits.

WVM: I saw the ceremony because my daughters wanted Craig David to win, but I prefer Robbie Williams, who deserved his three gongs.

Primary kids being told off by police for chalking on pavement.

WVM: What got me is that the boy's father said there were vandals around the corner damaging vehicles and property.

These two youngsters were an easy target. Police would rather pick on them than confront a gang of youths.

Caprice's dress at the Brits consists of a few loops of crochet.

WVM: She looked smashing, but it covered so little I reckon the bit around the neck must have been the most expensive part.

Coach firm National Express axing their on-board hostesses.

WVM: A crying shame. It's very

By 2001, the series was growing stale. The key art had changed but Paul Smith's middle-of-the-road opinions on the usual Tory subjects—sport, tax cuts, merit pay for teachers—had



The tweet that launched "White Van Dan" and temporarily derailed Emily Thornberry's career (http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-30139832).

not (3/3/2001, 8).

Even after the Tory-LibDem coalition swept to power in 2010, White Van Man continued to bedevil Labour. In the run-up to the party's disastrous 2015 elections, Emily Thornberry, MP for wealthy Islington and South Finsbury and shadow Attorney General, tweeted a picture of a house in Rochester, with its emblematic white van out front and not one but three St. George's cross flags flying across its second deck. Even without any commentary, the intent was plain: this was the sort of hyper–English, petit bourgeois voter that Labour could only shake its head at. There was no escaping the snobbishness of the image, and so Ed Miliband forced Thornberry to stand down (BBC 2014; Malik 2014). The van's owner, Daniel Ware, was quickly dubbed "White Van Dan," and his nativist, small-government political manifesto ran, sympathetically, in *The Sun* (Champion 2014).

If Laura's van is generic, her accent is particularly marked. Johansson speaks with a posh English, not a working-class Scottish accent. When she approaches men asking for directions, her accent helps explain her confusion. Still, in a film as allegorically invested as *Under the Skin*, the English/Scottish divide is also emblematic. New Labour had campaigned on the devolution of governmental authority to the national parliaments and had made good on its promises in 1998. Labour and the Liberal Democrats initially controlled the new Scottish Parliament, but in 2007 the Scottish National Party formed the government. Now firmly ensconced to the left of New Labour, the SNP won an outright majority the elections of May 5, 2011—as *Under the Skin* was shooting. That victory constituted a mandate for a referendum on full independence, and following a complex set of legal precursors, it would be held Sept. 18, 2014. While the referendum would be defeated, the spectacle of Labour working with the Tories and the Liberal Democrats to entice Scotland to stay—"Better Together" was the slogan—would help pave the way for the SNP's wholesale triumph in the Westminster elections on May 7, 2015, when they picked up 50 seats.

Under the Skin, then, is also a microcosm of the New Labour approach to intra-British politics, one that was already doomed. The Tory-LibDem coalition had not rolled back devolution—indeed, the UK-wide parties competed to see who might promise more and more, on the way to "DevoMax." But under the pressure of the Great Recession and the expectations of possible independence occasioned by the SNP's rising power, the usual English strategy of seduce-and-abandon was fracturing. Either it would work, in which case some large portion of Scotland would feel just as used, or it would fail, in which case Scotland would be lost forever as a left flank of British politics (Arnott 2015).

As particularly British as the connotations of the white van may seem, *Under the Skin* balances them by putting Johansson behind the wheel. Five years into development, she was attached to the production, and the movie was able to secure distribution (McClintock 2010). Relying on her bankability, rights were sold to French distributor StudioCanal at the American Film Market in 2010 for $4.5m, before filming had begun (Wiseman 2014). Casting U.S. stars in British films for marketing purposes had long been a successful strategy, but in the Working Title productions of the 1990s, Americans played Americans, fish-out-of-water in the UK (Andie MacDowell in *Four Weddings* [1994], Janeane Garofalo in Ireland in *The MatchMaker* [1997], Julia Roberts in *Notting Hill* [1999]). In contrast, Johansson would be playing an Englishwoman-out-of-water in Scotland.

But this national makeover, too, found its way into the production. When the movie was budgeted at $41m, Glazer and Alexander Stuart envisioned an elaborate opening sequence that would trace the process of the alien taking on human form. However, that version would have cost "a million pound." So when

the production was radically scaled back, the opening was reduced to “the construction of an eye” and a set of language lessons (Making of, 2014). The opening thus depicts the materialization of the instrument of vision that will be necessary for victim selection and the perfection of the voice that will be essential for victim seduction. At the same time, by shifting the instances of incarnation to vision and sound in their minimal versions, the opening becomes more clearly symbolic, more directly emblematic of the cinematic as such.

Yet as with the van, what gives the movie access to these radically different scales is the narrative of its making. Those opening language lessons were, Glazer emphasizes, “the very thing that Scarlett had to do to learn to speak with an English accent.” (Making of, 2014). And that accent would provide her character with the precise distance from her victims that would enable the seduction to occur—a distance that forever verges on becoming the radical distance of the alien or, barring that, the movie star. In the cozy language of marketing-speak as relayed by Sam Adams in *Rolling Stone*:

> “she's an alien in more sense than one: an otherworldly creature who's still getting used to the feel of her humanoid shell, and a movie star out among the hoi polloi” (2014).

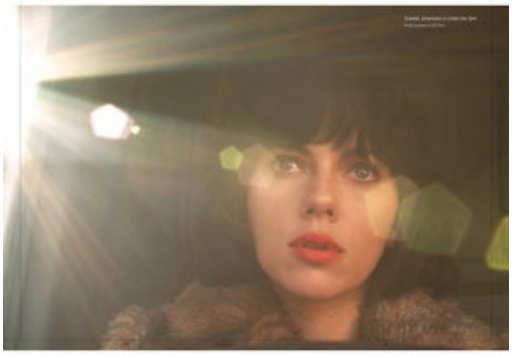
Back to meso

The analogy that is emerging here—US:UK::England:Scotland—depends on a particular ambiguity at heart, one that allows England to stand in for a more general British context even as that context appears on screen in its increasingly devolved state. In negotiating that ambiguity, *Under the Skin* thus performs a very precise office, not only for a particular reception culture, but for the motion picture industry of the UK more generally. No film has been more central to the contemporary system of British film financing than *Under the Skin*.

My intensively allegorical and case-driven approach stands against the dominant approach to analyzing British film policy. In most studies, individual films may be emblematic of particular arrangements—*Comrades* for British Screen,



Under the Skin is more than one movie among others. It receives prime locations in organizational promotional materials: it is the emblematic BFI film on its "Supporting UK Film" splash page (figure 8, http://www.bfi.org.uk/film-industry);



It merits the inside-the-back-cover two-page spread in Creative Scotland's strategy document (figure 9, *Creative Scotland on Screen: Film Strategy 2014–17*, 40–41).



Trainspotting for Film4, *28 Days Later* for the "franchise" era of lottery funding—but the films have no operational significance beyond their existence and their position in the financial flow. In this essay, as in my look at *Dope* (Connor 2015), I want to suggest that independent productions may take on unsuspected powers—material, ideological, conceptual, and institutional.

Film policy in the UK has been subjected to sudden organizational and ideological shifts for decades, moving in fits and starts through various models of neoliberalism. Arts administration has been "increasingly privatized and commercialized" in a search for "growth and sustainability"—that is, a long-dreamt-of self-sustaining industry with no need for state support (Long and Spink 2014 97). The initial break under Thatcher in which the National Film Finance Council was replaced by British Screen seems to be the most profound. In place of direct subsidies backstopped by exhibition quotas, the Thatcher government moved toward a quasi-non-governmental organization (quango) model (Spicer 2014).[3]

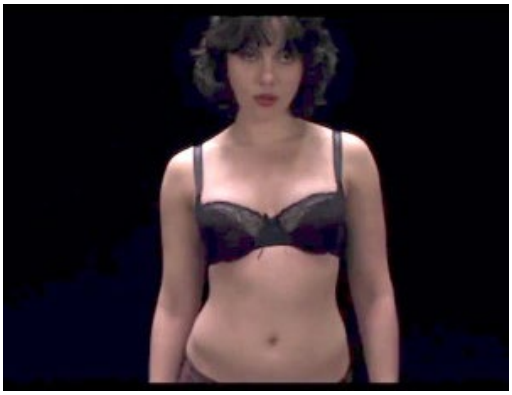
Direct subsidies for cultural production should have the advantage of mobilizing non-market criteria to justify them: we, the underwriters, spend this money to make these movies because those movies are *good* (in themselves, for a variety of reasons). Andrew Spicer calls these "selective" mechanisms (66). In contrast, "non-selective" tax-credit schemes and creative-industry justifications rely on economic logics and are subject to economic critique. Such support is justified when it supports the creation of good jobs, when it drives tourism to particular locations, and so on, but one might reasonably object that such economic ends are reachable via other routes, or that the tax-credit race to the bottom is doomed to fail, or that in times of austerity, income support or housing benefits should receive priority. Even more, market-based arguments in favor of subsidized media production can answer the fundamental objection to direct artistic subsidies, namely, that the movies that result are *bad* (elitist, arty, obscene) by piggybacking on the market's ostensibly greater sensitivity to popular taste as a stand-in for the political answerability that may be missing in direct-subsidy models.[4]

From Thatcher on, the UK system has combined aspects of both. The Major government replaced government funds with lottery money in 1995. In the ensuing two decades, granting organizations (variously the UK Film Council, regional Screen agencies, national Creative agencies, and the BFI) have based many awards on merit, broadly defined. Complementarily, and beginning in earnest in 1992, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) oversaw a set of complex and far larger tax sheltering and credit schemes. Currently, qualifying British productions are entitled to a 25% tax credit, where "qualifying" simply entailed meeting certain thresholds of UK or Commonwealth participation. Policy makers have churned through various schemes for putting the industry on a firm footing; none has resulted in a durable native distribution system. Initially, New Labour "intervened rapidly and decisively" to shore up UK "cultural industries" when it came to power in 1997 (Dickinson and Harvey 2005 420). The blunted radicalism of that first impetus gave way to an even further watered down defense of "creative industries" and a "retreat" towards "old distinctions between 'high art' and 'popular culture.'" (Dickinson and Harvey 424).

The resulting industry was, as John Adams put it,

> "indebted to the novel for inspiration, dependent on television and theatre for talent, and in hock to Hollywood for production values and aesthetic. Oscar and festival success still fuels the rhetoric of the film establishment" (2011).





And in the National Lottery's "Life Changing" campaign, the film—or, more salaciously, Johansson's nearly naked body—is the first example of something the viewer has "made possible. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7x0W_CkIyes, posted by BFI 2/5/15).



When this strategy works, the successes look like *Gosford Park* (Altman 2001), the first big hit of the UKFC era, or *The King's Speech* (Hooper 2010), "a suitable memorial to both the strengths and weaknesses of British cinema under New Labour" (Newsinger 2012). British cinema exists, in this model, to occupy "the 'lost middle'…the mid-budget films that tend to be awards bait: the classy, intelligent stuff, interesting but not edgy" (Pulver and Brooks, 2014).

Under the Skin first went to the well in 2005, and received £150,000 in development funds from the UKFC. By the time it entered production, the UKFC had been abolished. The Tory/LibDem ascendancy in 2010 was swiftly and characteristically followed by a shakeup in organization of film policy. A "bonfire of the quangos" ensued. A wave of handwringing crested and broke, but, in the end, the changes were not catastrophic. As John Hill put it,

> "For all the *Sturm und Drang* accompanying the decision to close the Film Council, fundamental continuities in film policy remained" (2012, 335).

Even the feared "rationalization" of grant-making was

> "incomplete as devolution of political powers to the United Kingdom's 'nations' meant that…separate screen support agencies existed in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland" (Schlesinger 2015 466).

There were, indeed, cuts, but the UKFC's functions were largely subsumed under the BFI, which would begin administering lottery funds in April 2011. No longer simply an archive-and-exhibition agency with a modest budget to support non-commercial cinema, the BFI took up the responsibility for maintaining British motion picture production as part of its five-year plan, "Film Forever." In the BFI's first round of grant-making, *Under the Skin* received £50,000 in development funding and £1,673,744 in production funding. The latter was the largest single award of that cycle and would remain so until 2015 (BFI). *Under the Skin* was not finished. It went back to the BFI till each of the next three years, receiving another £446,000.

And while the BFI grants the lion's share of motion picture support, devolution has pushed some lottery funds to smaller national agencies. Here, too, *Under the Skin* benefitted from its Scottish locales and personnel. In June 2011, as it was collecting nearly £1.5m from the BFI, the project received a £300,000 award for filmmaking from Creative Scotland, the maximum award they could provide (Creative Scotland). As Robin MacPherson, director of Screen Academy Scotland saw it, *Under the Skin* constituted the sort of "relatively modest but strategically joined-up investments in skills, development and production financing" Scotland should undertake "while completing our film and TV drama infrastructure" (2014). Eventually, *Under the Skin* took in £2,494,744 across the UK, not including funds from Film4.

But *Under the Skin* does not confine its BFI and Creative Scotland appearances to spreadsheets. Wherever one looks—across websites, in the agencies' reports to the UK parliament, and in their strategy documents—there one finds ScarJo in her







The BFI logo emerging out of planetary lens flare before assuming its final alphabetic shape. Laura's eye emerging out of some unspecified biosynthesis before assuming its final shape.



A star emerges from the social contract.

wig, lippy , and fur coat. Just as the production relied on her drawing power to secure distribution, so its financiers rely on her all-but-masked attractiveness to negotiate their own contradictory relationship to the twin poles of art and commerce. Yes, they say, we have access to the sorts of international, Hollywood stars that vouch for our industrial competence, but in our productions they are nearly unrecognizable. They are stars, to be sure, but differently accented.

That opening scene, then, is not simply an allegory of cinema or of Johansson's emergence as a figure of international seduction. It is an account of the convergence of the movie's aims with those of its major funder. The alignment of the components of Laura's new eye replicate the lens flares of the BFI logo. Beneath the stridulant violin, Laura is learning to speak, first consonants, then syllables, then lists of words that seem to be alphabetical order. We catch her not at the beginning of the alphabet, but in the f's—feel, field, fill, filled, fills, foil. She is not quite saying "Film Forever," but it is close.

The reciprocity between agency and instance—between the BFI, Creative Scotland, FilmFour, StudioCanal, etc., and *Under the Skin*—suggests a harmonization of interests. The production receives funds for development, production, post, even distribution, and the agencies receive publicity and credibility in return. Yet that tidy system, like all "selective" award systems, runs the risk of seeming to be simply an alibi for a self-perpetuating coterie that deploys public money for private ends. In prior incarnations, the *un*popularity of British Screen productions or the struggles of the Lottery-funded franchisees became fodder for muckraking journalism.

That may be less the case with *Under the Skin*, with its rave reviews.[5] Still, tragedies have their bad consciences, and in the case of *Under the Skin*, that bad conscience is the elision of consent in the UK's twenty-year-old lottery funding system. In this system, vast numbers of ordinary folks take their chances, hoping to be selected—knowing that the system can only work if an overwhelming proportion will get nothing at all, while at the same time consoled in the knowledge that their losses will be, in some small part, converted into various nationally sanctioned cinema projects like *Under the Skin*. The lottery enacts the neoliberal economy's simultaneous consolidation of economic success in the hands of very few "winners," and its projection of a vast field of losers, ostensibly complicit in their own fate, and convinced of the absolute neutrality of the system's selection process. Such sublimation is the obverse of the film's insistence on the authenticity of its extended sequences of victim selection and person-on-the-street portraits.

When Laura's gaze broadens out from the predatory search for individual men, it takes in dozens of women-on-the-streets. Eventually the men and women begin to merge, the soundscape layers, and a composite sociality takes form.[6] As individuality gives way, it is replaced by a representative body, Johansson as Leviathan by way of the Vienna Secession, a bankable face surrounded by bubbling gold. Laura trolls for men's bodies; the production trolls for stories; the lottery for money. It falls to *Under the Skin* to make those opportunistic sorties undertaken at every level of the social cohere into something like a cultural strategy—into culture as such. [Figure 17]

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Notes

1. I discuss the relation between this sort of future perfect narration and the contemporary Hollywood mode of production in Connor 2014. Much of the rest of this essay measures the distance between Hollywood's future perfect and *Under the Skin*'s. [return to text]

2. The continuities between these scenes of failed consent and the scenes of failed consumption (cake eating) suggested to Osterweil (2014) that the film's subject was "the perils of becoming female." That is clearly so; but Laura is never victimized or punished for her consumption from the theft of the jacket through the regurgitated bite of cake. Being female in this film does not meaningfully restrict consumption; it debars consent.

3. To put it schematically: the NFFC was in the business of underwriting films the market would presumably never support; its brief assumed that there were simply things that the market got wrong. British Screen, in contrast, was in the business of coaxing the market into doing more of whatever it might want to do on its own. Whether that shift amounted to an abandonment of social democracy or whether, in contrast, social democracy was simply an interruption in a longer history of financialized, gentlemanly technocracy, is question taken up by O'Brien 2015.

4. For an overview of the past scandals of the Lottery era, see Fitzgerald 2010.

5. State funders do not expect to recoup their investments, particularly when they have a "film culture" remit. In its most commercially-focussed incarnation, the UKFC recouped about 50% of its production outlays. That figure is very high compared with its continental counterparts, but the UKFC was arguably the most interested in market success and certainly had the easiest potential access to the U.S. market. But even that figure was somewhat artificially high, boosted by the success of *The King's Speech*, a film that arrived too late to save the UKFC from assimilation into the BFI. (Adams 2011). Since taking charge, the BFI has reduced the amount it expects to recover from 50% to 30%—closer to the historical average—and again to 20% when it folded its microbudget operations in with the larger scale feature support. By ratcheting down the expected returns, the BFI hoped that it will have to take fewer "impairment" charges in future years. (BFI 2015 87)

As of 2015, *Under the Skin* has only begun to return funds to the BFI—a mere £10,000—and that number is sure to climb. Still, barring unforeseen video success, the film will not make a net positive financial contribution. In 2016 the BFI stopped reporting remittances for individual films of less than £100,000. Under the Skin fell below that threshold (BFI 2016 100).

6. The image "incorporated 93 blended 2K layers," each independently graded and corrected, according to VFX artist Tom Balkwill (Frazer 2014). http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-politics-flag-idUKKCN0J515Z20141121

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Ideology exposed — an introduction

by Chuck Kleinhans

In assembling this issue of *Jump Cut* it seemed useful to highlight some articles that dramatize the nature and function of ideology in mainstream media. Of course this has been a major concern of this publication since our first issue in 1974, which included "Genre Films and the Status Quo" and analyses of *The Exorcist, The Last Detail, Badlands*, and Truffaut's *Day for Night*. And equally, we've always given lots of attention to alternative films and video that challenge the dominant ideology.

Michael Pepe's two essays that follow look at some key films about the 2008 financial crisis. He provides an acute view of a major event that still shapes our time, especially in the United States. As the 2016 Presidential race highlights, the effect of the Great Recession, even after a modest recovery, has underlined the longer standing trend of economic inequality for the "middle" classes. Most working Americans and their families face economic stagnation or sliding backward, while the wealthiest have increased their share and prospered.

Pepe astutely points out that few people are equipped to understand the complexities of finance capitalism and the intricacies of credit default swap, but mass entertainment products do address these topical matters and help shape public understanding. It's important to understand this process because it shapes the public memory of what happened, how things stand, and what possibilities are on the horizon. The relative success of Donald Trump at working the fears and anger of ordinary people around issues of immigration, race, religion, and globalized trade is anchored in the economic anxieties of our time, promoting the magical thinking that a simple slogan such as "build a wall," or "deport all illegals," or "ban all Muslims," or "bring back our manufacturing jobs" could actually be implemented.

The suspicion of secretive elites, conspiracies in the highest levels of government, rogue units, and traitors has been fueled by right wing talk radio for decades, confirming a large segment of the population's worst fears. But Hollywood's thriller formula films supply that anxiety an imaginative and visualized narrative for a much larger audience. Right and left can imagine plausible scenarios of cynical and criminal manipulation, be that Hillary Clinton's personal emails or the Benghazi attack or Dick Cheney's masterminding "the dark side" of torture and rendition following 9/11. And screen media, both fictional and documentary, give us ways of seeing such stories. Sometimes these are directly about historical events (recently the O.J. Simpson trial, the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings, etc.); sometimes they are displacements or allegories that provide workplace and dinner table topics of conversation (*The Sopranos, Mad Men, Game of Thrones,* etc.). As Emily Nussbaum, *New Yorker* TV critic, has observed, modern water-cooler dramas "often work as an aesthetic Esperanto that lets us talk about politics without fighting about the news."

Ponzi-scheme con men appear as heroic or antiheroic scoundrels in recent works such as *The Wolf of Wall Street* and *Madoff,* and decidedly skewed portraits of corporate entrepreneurs have gathered large audiences with films such as *Steve Jobs* and *The Social Network*. The interesting anthology *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film, and Television: Twenty-First-Century Bust Culture* (ed. Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski) broadens the scope with imaginative readings of recent horror such as *Drag Me to Hell, Contagion, Paranormal Activity*, zombie narratives, and the conservative feminism of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. And the writers find economic/social class is at the center of popular television ranging from Tyler Perry's sitcom *Meet the Browns*, the dramas *Treme, Friday Night Lights, Downton Abbey*, and *Falling Skies* to reality shows such as *Hoarders* and *Pickers*.

Pepe's second contribution is a visual essay that broadens the terrain surveyed with a suggestive survey of US cinema's depiction of crime in high places and its social aftermath. This overview is meant to be suggestive, not exhaustive, and it invites our own imaginative connections to depictions of class antagonism in media history ranging from *Metropolis* to *The Hunger Games* or *The Great Gatsby* to *Gattaca*. Susan Sontag's essay, "The Imagination of Disaster" (included in her book *Against Interpretation*) provided a compelling ideological genre study of science fiction disaster films as allegories of the Cold War. More recently ecological catastrophe has joined the anxiety about aliens and earthquakes. Media analyst Douglas Kellner offered fairly close-stitched studies of recent political events and Hollywood film in his book *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Blackwell, 2010). His follow-up, *Media Spectacle and Insurrection 2011: From the Arab Uprisings to Occupy Everywhere* (Bloomsbury 2012), continues the pursuit across the global news apparatus including social media creation and diffusion.

Today, anyone who argues that fears of technological change have evaporated as we proceed into a future of driverless automobiles and smart phone access to the human universe isn't paying attention to the continuing anxieties seen in media about threatening surveillance by corporations and the state or robots discarding weak humans in say, *Her*. Clearly, popular media has thrived in the past few decades with sometimes comic, often darkly pessimistic, and occasionally heroic depictions of characters caught in a web of corporate, corrupting, and disastrous (for the individual and/or society) relations. Witness (in no particular order): *Syriana, Up in the Air, The Insider, Michael Clayton, Children of Men, American Psycho, Elysium, Promised Land, The Constant Gardner, Thank You for Smoking, Fight Club, Avatar*, *Breaking Bad.*

In a startling analysis of *Straight Outta Compton*, Jeff Menne casts the film about the rise of N.W.A.'s late 1980's success in a new light by positioning it within the context of various films on the 2008 financial crisis and new films on blackness. Rather than the expected story--a reenactment and celebration of the supergroup dominated by musical performance--the film becomes a critique of entertainment business capitalism.

Giving a close dissection of recent Hollywood films, Robert Alpert examines *Zero Dark 30* and Todd McGowan views *Interstellar*. Alpert returns with a study of *Ex Machina* (and then hits a trifecta with his article on the continuing *Hurt Locker* litigation elsewhere in this issue). Furthering the analysis, Scott Krzych takes a close look at the use of stock footage in Citizens United propaganda. Given the remarkable utility of stock images (made with a wonderfully vague and all-purpose communicative function), their actual use in didactic messaging can be stunningly revealing of ideology. (A truth that Trump has repeatedly underlined with social media images such as associating Hillary Clinton with a Jewish Star of David, piles of money, and the word "corrupt.")

Taking a different path, Jeanette Roan considers the psychological and emotional effects of media by asking about the reception by Asian and Asian American viewers of Asian embodiment on camera. Steven Papson adds to the discussion with a close (and personal) reading of a well-executed TV commercial for Shell Oil. This discussion can be seen as echoing some of the issues of actor embodiment in other sections of this issue, especially the collection of studies of Scarlett Johanssen in *Under the Skin* as well as the section on transgender representations.

Additionally, we are reprinting (with the original illustrations restored) earlier *Jump Cut* articles on *Lady Be Good*. I look at a classic Hollywood montage sequence to unpack the ideological baggage expressed in its formal organization, and Jane Gaines raises the always interesting question, can dogs dance?

Sometimes ideology is exposed in fairly subtle ways, as Sonika Jain points out in discussing two works on women detectives. The lead charcaters are both effective investigators and warm human beings whose compassion inflects the world of crime solving differently: as humanely correctable. Finally, I've added a short overview of some classics of ideological visual analysis: useful for those getting started, and an important refresher for all of us who understand that exposing ideology is one of the key strategies for building an effective citizenship for change.

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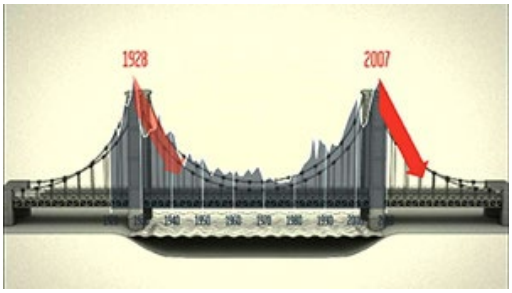
JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Eating, sleeping and watching movies in the shadow of what they do: representing capitalism in post 2008 popular films

by Michael Pepe



Capitalism for sale. As a sign of the times, the Lehman Brothers corporate logo becomes a collectable, hitting the auction block at Christie's for the second time. The collapse of the company was one of the key events in the larger domino effect that led to the Financial Crisis of 2008.



Charting disaster: One of many graphics from the Robert Reich documentary *Inequality for All* (Kornbluth, 2013) illustrates the breadth and depth of the concentration of wealth by comparing two seismic financial events.

People interested in learning about the Financial Crisis of 2008 are more likely to read a book or view a documentary rather than watch a popular movie. In fact, most working people, myself included, watch movies like *Margin Call*, *The Wolf of Wall Street,* or *The Big Short* more because of the films' stars, filmmakers, movie reviews, or advertising campaigns, rather than a burning desire to learn more about how economic systems work or fail to work. Nevertheless, topical social issues are part of what attracts viewers to a movie. [click here to see visual essay on films related to the introduction]

The 2008 crisis affected so many of us that, like the 1929 crisis, it could not be ignored as an anomaly, a "market correction," blamed on a rogue entity like ENRON or Bernie Madoff, and then written about in periodic "below the fold" articles. In the wake of the crisis, a battle-worn public casts a suspicious eye on the financial markets after losing jobs and savings, drowning in underwater homes, and seeing their children burdened with exorbitant college debt only to have them chase after lackluster jobs that threaten to disappear at any moment. Regardless of individual viewers' political leanings, all of this must surely affect us as we watch movies that dramatize or allude to the events involving the crisis and then try to make sense out of what fictional narratives are trying to convey about our post-Crisis political economy.

Selecting from a flood of international fiction and non-fiction films that reference the crisis directly or indirectly, I have limited this article to five "popular" movies that I feel each has something uniquely different to say about the current state of capitalism:

- capitalism as a patriarchal tradition (*Arbitrage*),
- capitalism as a perceived deterministic given (*Margin Call*),
- capitalism as a moral transgression (*Wolf of Wall Street*), and
- capitalism, in the time-honored tradition of the gangster genre, as a cynical acceptance of, and model for avarice that is nearly indistinguishable from a criminal enterprise (*Killing Them Softly*).

Cosmopolis, more art-house film than popular movie, offers a compelling allegory of the (self) destructive nature of capitalism. I then offer a brief discussion of *Too Big to Fail* and *The Big Short* as books and films. In a Visual Essay following this analysis, I address some of the complementary issues, movie genres, and documentaries on the subject that raise additional but related concerns. And so



It's not the economy stupid; it's the emotional journey. The wildly entertaining TV series *Breaking Bad* follows the exploits of a meek high school chemistry teacher with cancer who becomes a respected and feared drug kingpin. Skyler (Anna Gunn) and Walter (Bryan Cranston) marvel at the pile of drug money they couldn't launder and ponder how much is enough.

my approach is part narrative and part visual analysis.

By definition, popular movies offer an emotional journey rather than an intellectual pursuit. Needless to say, this is why you do not have to be an astrophysicist to understand *Gravity* (Curarón, 2013), a meth user or chemist to enjoy *Breaking Bad* (Gilligan, 2008-13), or an economist to appreciate *Margin Call* (Chandor, 2011).And so when popular films explore how economic policy fuels social stratification, they will likely be tethered to a personal human drama as experienced by the fabulously wealthy, the miserably downtrodden, that vast marvel known as the middle class, or a combination of the above.

Previous to the most recent economic crisis, filmic critiques of capitalism focused on mostly invisible corporate villains who were represented by their legal surrogates in David and Goliath revenge stories. In a 2000 article that references *The Rainmaker* (Coppola, 1997), *A Civil Action* (Zaillian, *1998), The Insider* (Mann, 1999) and *Erin Brockovich* (Soderbergh, 2000), Philip Lopate argues that that cycle of anti-corporate films lacks a "nuanced presentation of corporate life" opting for "melodramatic caricature" instead. According to Lopate, the reason for this is that these "movies are [reluctant] to show the corporate world from the inside." As a result:

> "Anticorporate films are only seemingly subversive. In fact, they enshrine the capitalist principles of individualism and hard work. The old American ethos declared that if you worked hard you might become a millionaire; the new one says, if you pound the pavements and scan the computer records long enough, you might nail a millionaire."



In Michael Moore's *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), the Smith family learns that workers are just another commodity to Walmart, who along with many blue chip corporations like Bank of America and Citibank, regularly take out "Dead Peasant" insurance policies on their employees. Walmart collected $18,000 for itself at the death of the Smith children's 26-year-old mother while the family was saddled with medical and funeral cost. In another example from the film, a Texas bank collected $5 million on the death of 41-year-old father of two, also leaving the family nothing.

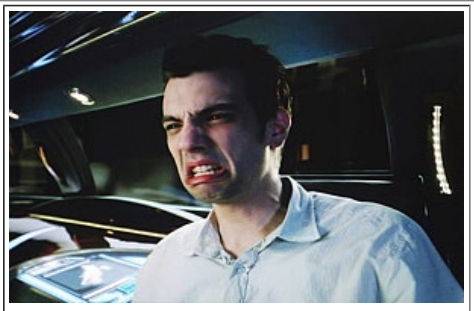
Recently, more popular films have been released that do in fact look at the corporate world from the inside, accurately or not. Seemingly, the Financial Crisis of 2008 requires a look from the inside as it does not involve the specificity of environmental destruction dramatized in the previous cycle. In other words, the financial crisis is not about an individual tort claim against a bad faith insurance company (*The Rainmaker*), or toxins that poison the local water supply because of the actions of a corporation (*Erin Brockovich)*, nor does it involve the punishment of a single whistleblower, or the dubious relationship between the media and the industry it is reporting about (*The Insider*). Instead, the public has grudgingly come to understand something new as a result of the Crisis: Our economic problems are systemic and are rooted in a dangerously incestuous interdependence among rapacious financial institutions, complicit legislators, complacent governmental regulatory agencies, and a largely apathetic public victimized by predatory lenders and our own financial and political ignorance. A culture of greed has, intentionally or not, been fostered by our institutions for decades and fueled consumers' self-destructive appetite for stuff.



In an early scene from *Cosmopolis* (Cronenberg, 2012), a twenty-something IT security analyst expresses a host of existential doubts and insecurities to his boss, a 28-year-old asset manager. From the confines of a stretched limo, he also conveys a self-reflexive sense of hubris: "People eat and sleep in the shadow of

In the previous cycle of anti-corporate films, underdog lawyers representing an underclass of victims try to fix the problems created by capitalism by using a legal system shaped by capitalism. Justice may be elusive but there is always the promise of tort money.

what we do." Unlike the previous cycle of films that featured the plight of working and middle class people front and center, 'the people' are virtually absent from the current cycle. When working people make an appearance they are mute witnesses objectified as car park attendants, household servants, office cleaners, strippers, demonstrators, or as part of a faceless crowd, passive in the background to a narrative foreground animated by investment bankers, stockbrokers, fund managers, venture capitalist, and a host of financiers. The setting for all but one of the post 2008 cycle of films written about here is New York City, but it is not the city of neighborhoods where most residents eat, sleep and watch movies. Instead the cinematic representation of the city is more a symbol, a port of call for global capitalism, if not its locus.



Young, smart, and raised by wolves. From *Cosmopolis*, Jay Baruchel as Shiner, in the throes of an existential crisis over his passion for information, and doubt as to how it is used.



Demonstrators parade a prop, the capitalist rat, past a limo in Times Square. The current cycle of anti-corporate movies feature both figurative and literal views from the limo.



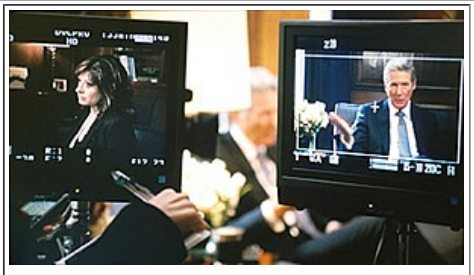
The tipping point: Meanwhile, from *Margin Call*, a virtually invisible public goes about its business unaware ...



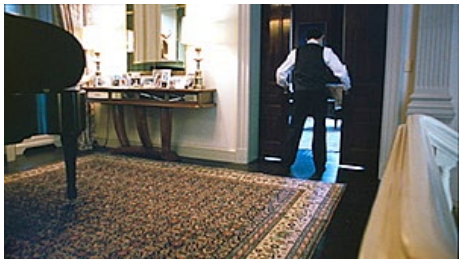
... that they are about to have their pockets royally picked.

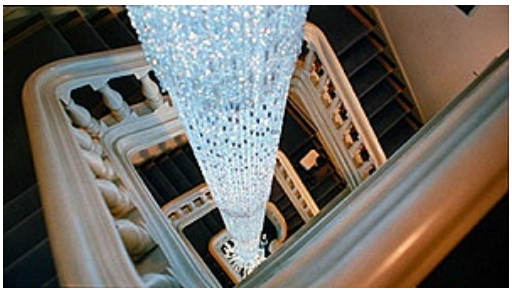
Taken together, the films offer no unifying message about the state of post 2008 capitalism nor advise what to do about it. Instead, they dramatize iterations of greed that are psychological, philosophical and institutional in nature. While defining the contours of a pathology of greed, the films explore rough-and-tumble concepts close to the heart of many popular narratives: the Faustian bargain, patriarchy, economic manifest destiny, the Hobson choice, nihilism, and the horror, folly, and joy of living in the material world.

Arbitrage (Jarecki, 2012)





The rewards that result in the willingness to engage in ruthless behavior in the marketplace are showcased during the opening credits.	Shots of servants performing household duties in the opulent home of the Miller family are intercut ...
	
... with the hedge fund billionaire being interviewed about his exploits by CNBC/FOX anchor Maria Bartiromo (above) ...	... and with shots of Robert's wife Ellen, who behaves with the complacency of the lapdog she holds, until the last act of the movie.





Sometimes a chandelier is not a chandelier: While all of the films written about here invoke the social patriarchy of a white male-centric universe, the imagery of familial patriarchy is very direct in *Arbitrage*. Upon entering Robert's home we are met with a immense, glowing crystal chandelier that rises like a glass phallus though the center of a spiral staircase that leads him to rooms where his wife and an army of adoring children and grandchildren wait to surprise him on his 60th birthday.

Arbitrage uses the conventions of a family melodrama to tell a story about a wealthy patriarch and the politics of class, gender and race. After hedge-fund billionaire Robert Miller's (Richard Gere) surprise 60th birthday party, Miller makes excuses to his wife Ellen (Susan Sarandon) and heads off to meet his young French mistress (Laetitia Casta). By the end of the first act, Robert has fallen asleep at the wheel of his mistress' car and she is instantly killed. Robert leaves the scene of the accident and spends the rest of the movie dodging the police who are trying to prove that he's guilty of involuntary manslaughter. Complicating matters, Robert is also trying to evade "fraudulent conveyance" charges after misappropriating $400 million of his clients' money to invest in a copper mine that didn't pay off. [click here to see visual essay on films related to *Arbitrage*]

In the process of circumventing his personal and professional legal problems, he manipulates and places in legal jeopardy various people including his daughter and business partner, Brooke (Brit Marling), and Jimmy Grant (Nate Parker), the African American son of his recently deceased chauffeur of 20 years. The parallel stories show how Miller justifies betraying his daughter; it helps him with his fraudulent conveyance problem. Similarly, he exploits the son of his former driver to avoid the scandal of being charged with involuntary manslaughter. The movie's interest derives from its plot.

Lionized for his success in the market during a TV interview, Robert rationalizes, justifies and apologizes for his aggressive behavior which he connects to what he learned from the experiences of his working class Depression/WWII era parents: Robert's father welded steel for the navy; his mother worked for the V.A; they lived through the Depression, Pearl Harbor, and the Bomb; they didn't "think bad things might happen, they *knew* bad things would happen." His life-story implies that his family's wealth came from their willingness to seek out and exploit bad things that are about to happen to other people. During the interview we also learn that Robert has made his fortune by betting on a housing crisis during a housing boom—by speculating and counting on the misfortune of others.

	
White man's burden: Making a speech at	In both pleasant and unpleasant situations,

his 60th birthday party, Robert uses the language of objectification, as he refers to this gathering of familial humanity as his “best work.”	Robert, seemingly blind to his own blatant hypocrisy, is quick to remind family members and associates of the self-perceived burdens and responsibilities of the patriarch.
	
We are family: The chiaroscuro lighting during the birthday scene may remind viewers of *The Godfather* movies ...	...as much as Robert’s request that there be, “no business tonight” after his son brings up the sale of Miller Capital, the family business, at the family table.
	
Family values: Shortly after the heartfelt birthday speech, he makes his excuses to the wife and then it’s off to see the mistress.	Robert repeatedly demonstrates that the acquisition and safeguarding of his personal wealth and power, and the preservation of his own skin, will take precedence over all else.



Jimmy, the surrogate son, lives in Harlem, has a prior conviction and is called upon to extricate Robert from the crash site because Robert’s biological son “would have fucked it up.” As a result, Jimmy is arrested and then released with the help of Robert’s lawyers. Jimmy naively asks Robert why he didn’t stay at the scene since the death was not intentional. Robert offers his self-promoting, paternal rationalization:

> “I couldn’t. Because I have responsibilities. If I stayed there, a lot of people would have gotten hurt. I got business troubles you understand. People rely on me.”

When Jimmy is offered a $2-million dollar trust, he exhibits working class pride by taking offense to the idea that he’s being paid off not to snitch. “Do you think money is going to fix this?” says Jimmy. Robert replies, “What else is there?” By the end of the film Jimmy does take the money saying, “I’m going to do something good with it.” Shortly after this scene, Brooke confronts her father/partner with



Father figure: Brooke Miller with her father; Jimmy Grant with his surrogate father. Both characters are presented with ethical and legal dilemmas because of the actions of the persuasive Robert Miller. Depicted as young, principled but naïve, they are offended by actual or implied bribes offered to them, but which they both will eventually accept.

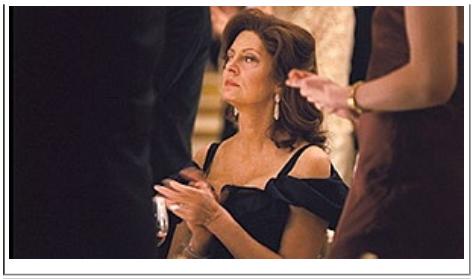
the complaint that because of his actions at the firm, she faces the possibility of losing her brokers license, jail time and a ruined reputation. Robert explodes, "You are not my partner! You work for me! Everybody works for me!" And later more calmly, "I'm the patriarch. That's my role." Robert tells Brooke he didn't commit fraud; he made a bad bet. He describes the bad bet on the copper mine as "a license to print money for everybody. Forever! It is God." Again Robert denies self-interest. He refers to himself as "the oracle" and implies that he was looking out for the interests of "everybody" and so he is entitled to take risks, even if it means operating "outside the charter" and lying about it. The parallel stories of manslaughter and fraud link his professional and personal behavior. In his view, everything that he does is for the sake of the family or his business relations.



Accidents will happen. Somehow, Robert has conflated leaving the scene of an accident for which he is responsible with making a personal sacrifice that will eventually help others. The archetypal trickle-down capitalist as depicted in many of these films, demonstrates a hypocritical paternalism accompanied by a strong sense of entitlement. They often do not acknowledge or perhaps even perceive their own self-interest in accumulating great wealth; instead they believe they are following the natural order of things and that their success serves some greater social good.

Ellen had tacit knowledge of Robert's French mistress and other dalliances, and has also become aware of his financial problems. Now that Robert has placed their daughter in legal jeopardy by making her complicit in the fraud, the matriarch in Ellen emerges ("You broke our little girl's heart") to challenge the authority of the patriarch. Robert is tossed a separation agreement in which all ownership and voting rights transfer out of Miller Capital into the charitable foundation that is to be administered by their daughter. Ellen will lie to the police about Robert's whereabouts on the night of the incident as long as he signs the agreement. Angered, Robert complains that Ellen is trying to blackmail him. Ellen replies, "I think we call it negotiating," something Robert has been doing in many ways throughout the movie.

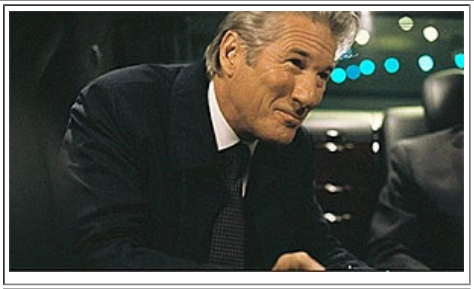
The film ends as it began, with a celebration of billionaire Robert Miller, this time at a black tie charitable affair. Now the applause and commendations from the family are hollow—a show for the public. The family is destroyed but reaps the rewards from Robert's fraudulent deal. Like Jimmy, Ellen and Brooke will no doubt, do something good with the money. Robert gets to keep the pretense of respectability, a good part of his money, and avoids legal trouble.



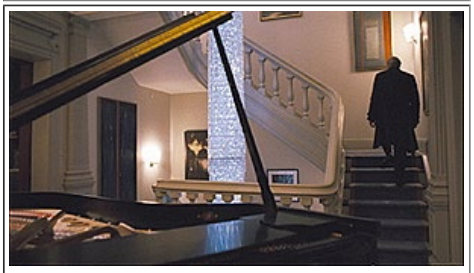
Ultimately Robert Miller is depicted as a kind of bulletproof monster, able to deflect social and moral responsibilities and evade legal consequences. Even when the police try falsifying evidence, they can't nail him. His power, wealth, and cunning, shield him from any meaningful penalty. As the tagline from the movie says: Power is the best alibi.

Because of the film's focus on family melodrama, the actual practices of hedge-fund managers and arbitrageurs, and the impact they have on the public are implied in the narrative background and are easily obscured. Instead, the term arbitrage (risk-free opportunity to buy low and sell high) becomes an ironic if shadowy personal metaphor for the actual practice, and what the viewer is left with is a smartly sketched psychology of avaricious self-interest in the lone character of billionaire hedge-fund manager Robert Miller.

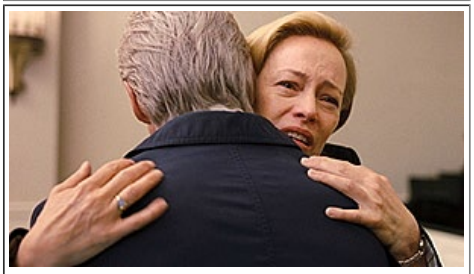
The art of the deal: Robert Miller's most authentic, cat-that-ate-the-canary smiles, emerge at moments of victory over those who have failed to sublimate his power. On the left, after selling his business thereby plugging the $400 million hole, avoiding charges of fraud, and making a profit. ...

... On the right, after outfoxing the police, thereby alleviating his guilt by winning Jimmy a get out of jail free card, and dodging the public disgrace of criminal charges.




The art of the deal, part 2: In the final act of the movie Ellen puts a metaphorical chink in the glass phallus when she challenges her husband's role as the patriarch. ...

... In a stark if obvious visual metaphor, Robert and Ellen stand on either side of their king size bed while Robert reads the separation agreement.

	
Bulletproof: At the funeral parlor, his dead mistress' clueless mother (Gabrielle Lazure) embraces Robert, thanking him for all the support he gave her artist daughter.	Detective Bryer (Tim Roth) is Columbo-esque in many ways except in his ability to nail his wealthy adversary.

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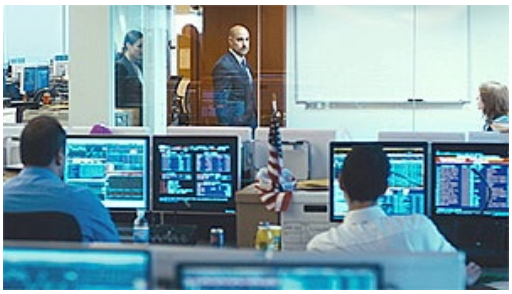
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Margin Call (Chandor, 2011)





Margin Call —based on a true story: On the commentary track of the DVD, the writer/director, J.C. Chandor, explains that he wrote the HR firing scene in the winter of 2007 or 2008 while on the phone with a friend who gave him the blow-by-blow description of a mass downsizing as it was unfolding at Citibank, the consumer division of the multinational Citigroup.

Margin Call presents a fictional version of the origins of the actual 2008 crisis. Absent manslaughter and tales of infidelity, the movie stays geographically and thematically closer to the corporate boardroom than does *Arbitrage*. [click here to see visual essay on films related to *Margin Call*]

The film opens during a cyclical downsizing in which a grim-faced human resource staff invades the office of an unnamed, fictional investment bank. Eighty percent of its workforce is fired, while the remaining twenty percent watch on. While being escorted out of the building by security, Eric Dale (Stanley Tucci), Chief of Risk Management, gives a flash drive to Peter Sullivan (Zachary Quinto), a young co-worker whom he was mentoring, and tells him to be careful. Soon after, Peter discovers that the drive contains data showing how the firm's actions will have a disastrous domino effect on the larger economy, and will leave the firm "holding the biggest bag of odorous excrement ever assembled in the history of capitalism," as the CEO of the company later says.

The remainder of the film examines how the executive staff will deal with the crisis in order to ensure their survival. In the process, the film plays out a deterministic world-view of capitalism in which its elite core is seduced into "golden handcuffs' (sky-high salaries) at the beginning of their careers and protected at the end of their careers with "golden parachutes" (sky-high exit bonuses). The protocol guarantees a tribalistic survival of the system by ensuring that team players never get hurt. On the road from handcuffs to parachute, the characters are confronted with a gauntlet of workaday realities such as social Darwinism, the Hobson choice, the brain drain, conspicuous consumption, and the Faustian bargain.





Exit stage right: With two "Banker Boxes" filled with 19 years of office knickknacks, Eric Dale (Stanley Tucci) is denied access to the company server, email and cell service even before he has exited the building, to which he also no longer has access. In spite of HR's suggestion, Dale, takes the dismissal personally and smashes his cell phone.

Eric Dale is ushered into a room where two HR officers tell him it's nothing personal and then present him with a Hobson's choice: he has 24 hours to accept the severance package they are offering him or it will be revoked. The Hobson choice—a choice with only one palatable option—will reappear at several points in the story, underscoring the view that financial markets comprise a closed, deterministic system where choice is illusory.

To bolster morale on the floor after the mass exodus, Sam Rogers (Kevin Spacey),

the sales manager, coaxes applause from the surviving 20%. He proclaims that although the people that were let go were “good people…good at their jobs,” the remaining employees are better, and as surviving staff they now have a greater opportunity for success because the loss of their colleagues means less competition. Scenes like this repeat themselves and indicate that Social Darwinism is clearly one of the film’s major themes.



Buried in Sam’s pep talk is a veiled threat and tacit knowledge that anyone of the remaining staff could be the next to go.



By the end of the film the threat is unveiled when nearly all of them are in fact let go.



Described as “the tip of the sword of capitalism” by screenwriter/director Chandor, Will Emerson [left], the lead trader, is full of blustery machismo talk.



The men talk a lot about about compensation, including [framed by the dancer's legs] Seth’s speculation to Peter about how much a stripper earns.

Upon discovering the significance of the flash drive’s data and unable to contact the persona non grata Eric, Peter calls coworkers Seth Bregman (Penn Badgley) and Will Emerson (Paul Bettany) who are out drinking with the boys. Like all of the movies discussed here, *Margin Call* is decidedly white male-centric and features only one major female character. If Social Darwinism is a major theme, the Darwinian survival of the fittest is here measured by the age and income of the players. We learn that Seth is 23 years old and made nearly a quarter of a million dollars in the previous year; Will, in his thirties, made $2.5 million. Embracing a the-more-you-make-the-more-you-spend philosophy, Will complains/brags about how the price of living large weighs heavily on his disposable income and how the money is never enough to support sending money home to the folks, money for prostitutes, and the cost of owning an Aston Martin. The three men, loyal to Sam Rogers, are offended by the fact that he makes less money than the younger (age 43) Jared Cohen (Simon Baker). We also learn that the CEO, whose helicopter has yet to land on the building’s helipad, made $86 million in salary and bonuses the previous year.









[Top] Simon Baker as Jared Cohen with Sam, and Jeremy Irons as CEO John Tuld, a hybrid of Dick Fuld, [bottom left] the last CEO of the defunct Lehman Brothers and John Thain, the final CEO of Merrill Lynch before it merged with Bank of America. The director's father enjoyed a long career with 'Mother Merrill' before retiring in 2007, and became the model for the Kevin Spacey character.





Like the Jack Nicholson "you want me on the wall" speech in *A Few Good Men*, Will's comments mix blunt truth and rationalizations about questionable personal decisions and organizational policy. It's another example of the paternal trickle-down theory of corporate entitlements leading to an imagined larger social good.



The money and the excitement of how it is earned is these men's *raison d'être* and it is also what alienates them from the rest of humanity. "Look at these people," says Peter watching passersby go about their business on a city street, "Wandering around with absolutely no idea what's about to happen." Late in the film Will makes an obligatory speech to Seth about the impact the work they do has on the economy. The speech, more of a rant, was ignited by Seth's expression of sympathy for how "real people" will be affected by the impending crisis and has a similar logic to the "you can't handle the truth" tirade made by the Jack Nicholson character in *A Few Good Men (*Reiner, 1992). Here Will says:

> "People want to live like this, in their cars and the big fucking houses they can't even pay for—then you're necessary. The only reason that they all get to continue living like kings is because we've got our fingers on the scales in their favor. I take my hand off, then the whole world gets really fucking fair really fucking quickly, and nobody actually wants that. They say they do, but they don't. They want what we have to give them, but they also want to play innocent and pretend they have no idea where it came from and that's more hypocrisy than I'm willing to swallow. So fuck normal people."

Still unable to find Eric, Peter becomes the focal point at meetings with superiors who don't know him and question him about his background. He tells them that he holds a doctorate in engineering with a specialty in propulsion from MIT. He says his "thesis was a study in the ways that friction ratios affect steering outcomes in aeronautical use under reduced gravity loads." The language of engineering must sound as foreign and awkward to the executives at this meeting, as the language of finance—quants, derivatives, credit default swaps, tranches—sounds to the average film viewer. "So you're a rocket scientist," Jared simplifies. The terms rocket scientist and Chief of Risk Management are shorthand terms that suggest much while explaining very little. When he's asked how he came to work at the firm, Peter explains more simply,

> "It's all just numbers really. Just changing what you're adding up. And to speak freely, the money here is considerably more attractive."

The brain drain, the siphoning of "human capital" away from innate desires, natural abilities, intellectual pursuits or social interests, is another major theme of *Margin Call*. Much later in the film when Eric Dale is finally located, he and Will have a conversation on the steps of Eric's Brooklyn home. Here we learn that like Peter, Eric was an engineer. He recounts in great detail and with pride his experience of building a bridge in Ohio in 1986, and how that bridge has had a positive and long-term effect on people's lives. In one of the concluding scenes, CEO Tuld reminds Sam that he is fortunate because he could have been digging ditches all these years instead of working for the firm, to which Sam replies, "At



Both Peter and Eric share a history as engineers who opted for a much more lucrative position in finance, but not without some regret.



When the music's over, turn out the lights: In a climactic scene, Tuld explains to a fearful and mostly docile executive staff that the reason he gets the "big bucks" is because of his ability to predict what the "music" (the financial market) will do and "standing here tonight I'm afraid that I don't hear a thing—just silence." ...



... Tuld's comment is an allusion to former Citigroup CEO Charles Prince's now famous 2007 statement made just months before the Crisis: "[A]s long as the music is playing you've got to get up and dance. We're still dancing." Some months later, when the music finally did stop, Prince retired, leaving Citigroup with a $64 billion drop in its market value, at which point he engaged his golden parachute and danced all the way to the bank with a $38 million pay package, plus many other hefty perks.

least there'd be some holes in the ground to show for it." There is a sense that the work the firm performs is so abstract that it holds little personal value or satisfaction beyond the acquisition of wealth: wealth for wealth's sake.

During a very tense 4 A.M. meeting with the executives, senior partners and the recently arrived John Tuld, a decision is made to unload billions of dollars of toxic mortgage-backed securities that the company holds. Sam argues that it's wrong to sell something that has no value thereby killing the market and ending any trust that their clients might have in the company. Just as Robert Miller in *Arbitrage* corrected his daughter, telling her that he did not commit fraud but made a bad bet, Tuld makes a semantic correction: they are not selling junk to unsuspecting clients, they "are selling to willing buyers at the current fair market price, so that we may survive." Tuld reminds Sam and the others that his motto has been, "Be first, be smarter, or cheat." He insists he doesn't cheat, but fails to see how this looks like cheating. He acknowledges that there are a lot of smart people in the room but knows that he's in a game of musical chairs and the only way out of their dilemma is to be first. When the music stops he wants to make sure the firm has a place to sit at the table.

The illusion of choice, or a Hobson's choice, is another primary theme in *Margin Call*. Acknowledging Sam's reluctance to unload the company's junk assets, Tuld asks, "If I made you, how would you do this?" Tuld can't *make* Sam do anything, yet Sam eventually does exactly what Tuld requests. Tuld desperately needs Sam to motivate the sales force to sell the junk assets as fast as possible before the buyers realize that the invisible hand of the market has, to reference another children's party game, tossed them a hot potato. After balking, Sam buckles and gives his sales force another pep talk accompanied by still another Hobson's choice. He tells them that what they are about to do will effectively end their careers but then he gives them individual and group sales goals that could reward them with nearly $3 million dollars each for their day's labor. In other words, they can quit or be fired and get nothing, or they can work, then quit or be fired, and possibly walk away with a fat paycheck.

When Eric was terminated he had to "choose' between accepting the severance package or immediately losing his income and health care. When the firm realizes that Eric has information that could hurt them if it becomes public too soon, Eric can *choose* between being imprisoned in the office for a short time and keeping his severance package while getting paid, according to his calculation, $176,471 an hour, or refusing and possibly getting nothing. It's in this waiting room where we also find the only major female character, Sarah Robertson (Demi Moore), whom Tuld has selected over her male counterpart, Jared Cohen, to serve as the corporate scapegoat. She waits with Eric not knowing what her severance package will be.

Near the end of the "fire sale," as the traders are unloading the toxic assets, the human resources staff returns to eliminate more positions. Sam storms out of his office and tells Tuld that he wants out. Trying to allay Sam's self-doubt about what he's just done, Tuld presents a brief history of capitalism saying, "It's just money," and then rattles off a list of about a dozen years as if they were the names of his children, which in a sense they are. The dates represent a timeline of economic crises starting with 1637 and ending in the present day. "It's all just the same thing, over and over. We can't help ourselves," says Tuld, affirming his conviction that capitalism is manifest destiny: a closed, deterministic system. Tuld tells Sam that he needs to have him stay on for another two years. Sam entered the room determined to quit but leaves the room choosing to stay because, as he says, "I

need the money."



No good deed goes unpunished: The two people who warned their higher ups about the possibility of a crisis go to the top of the shit list. Telling Sarah (Demi Moore) "I need a head to feed to the traders on the floor," Tuld sentences her to the waiting room with Eric.



Reading between the spoken and unspoken lines of Sarah and Eric's conversation, Sarah laments and resents that she chose to work at the firm over having a family, whereas the men at the firm could have both if they so chose.



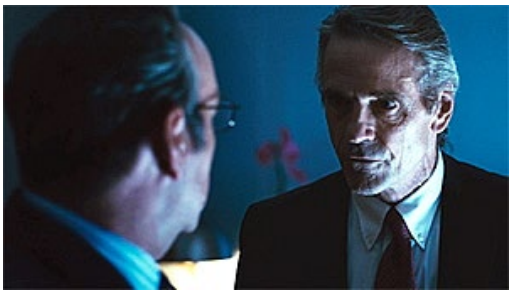
It's déjà vu all over again: Trying to allay Sam's guilt and keep him in the fold, Tuld proffers another of the films obligatory speeches: "You and I can't control it [the capitalist economy], or stop it, or even slow it, or even ever so slightly alter it. We just react. " ...



... "And we make a lot of money if we get it right, and we get left by the side of the road if we get it wrong. And there's always been and there always will be the same percentage of winners and losers, happy fucks and sad sacks, fat cats and starving dogs in this world."

When Sam is first introduced at the beginning of the film, he's crying; not because 80% of his staff was just fired but because his dog is dying and in spite of spending $1000 a day, there's nothing he can do to save her life. In the very last sequence Sam is digging a hole in the lawn on a large property in front of the stately home where he no longer lives. His ex-wife (Mary McDonnell), a woman he no longer has a meaningful relationship with, watches. He buries his dog in a place that represents all that he has gained and then lost. Sam has made his Faustian deal. He's gained the world and lost his soul, here ironically symbolized by the burial of his beloved dog.

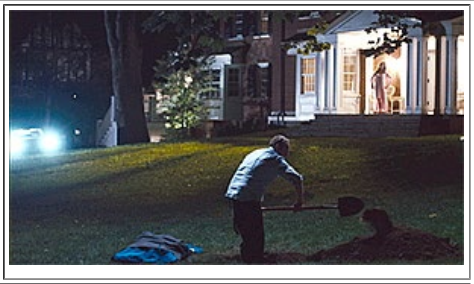




Written in the style of a dialogue-driven chamber play with few locations, *Margin Call* gets its energy from the performances, often with no more than two characters at a time.

Arbitrage and *Margin Call* are critical of certain business practices and personal behavior while being careful not to condemn or excuse the system they examine. Conflicts and contradictions drive the narrative but leave vague or at least up to viewer interpretation the links between practices detrimental to the public interest, criminal malfeasance, corporate policy, and legislative inaction. The films' writers/directors are sons of parents that have or had careers in New York's financial district; both movies reflect a familiarity with that world which seems as authentic as the questions and doubts raised in the plots. In the next film I discuss, *Wolf of Wall Street* (Scorsese, 2013), a son of working-class parents who were employed in the garment district a few miles north of Wall Street created a vision of the financial markets that is vastly different than the previous two films in its source, tone, style and purpose.





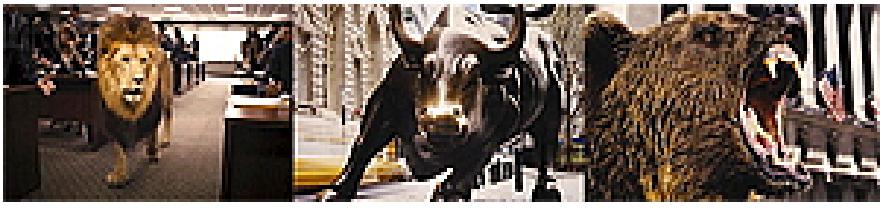
Yes Virginia, god spelled backwards is you know who. Sam gains the world but loses his dog.





Ignored by the mighty ship of state: Director Chandor, who has identified himself as a capitalist in numerous interviews, explores doubts and contradictions, if in a more allegorical and poetic fashion, in his second film, *All is Lost* (2013), where the main character (Robert Redford) is marooned at sea after a stray commercial shipping container pokes a fatal hole in his yacht as he sleeps. Later in the film, an enormous Maersk shipping vessel with thousands of such containers passes dangerously close to his raft, dwarfing the unseen castaway, and failing to rescue him. The man tries hanging on to as many of his possessions as possible for as long as possible, but piece-by-piece he is forced to part with them in order to survive.

The Wolf of Wall Street (Scorsese, 2013)



Lions, bulls and bears, oh my!—These three images are featured in the opening sequence of the film during which a TV commercial for Belfort's company, Stratton Oakmont, is seen. The advert appears to reference a 1992 commercial for the Dreyfus Corporation in which a lion and a bull face off in front of Federal Hall on Wall Street. The three beasts may also reference a modern iteration of Dante's lion, leopard, and she-wolf, generally interpreted as the sins of pride, greed, and lust.

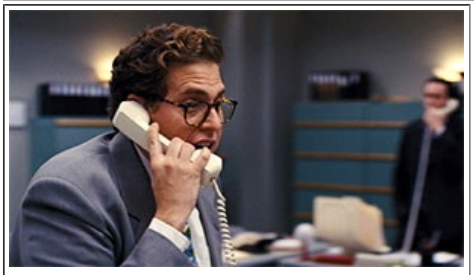
The story told in Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street,* takes place before the 2008 Crisis. The script is based on a work of non-fiction, a memoir chronicling the life of Jordan Belfort, a stockbroker who ended his multi-million dollar career with a twenty-two month stay in a federal prison. *The Wolf of Wall Street, The Aviator* (2004), *Goodfellas* (1990), and *Raging Bull* (1980), to mention just a few of Scorsese's movies based on the lives of actual people, are not neatly categorized as biopics. The filmmaker's freewheeling "anything goes' shooting and editing style, the counterintuitive narrative development of a strong spiritual subtext in films that feature characters who gleefully engage in violence and profanity, and the recurring theme of how certain socially constructed ideas of masculinity lead to gender polarization and social isolation, override the importance of other narrative details that usually make up a standard biographical sketch. For this reason, although Scorsese's character-driven films have a narrative arc, their plot is often subservient to the construction and execution of the individual scenes that explore character behavior as a portal into the interior life. Also for this reason,

the biographical accuracy of the plot is not of primary importance. The spirit not the letter of the law is what's sought. [click here to see visual essay on films related to *The Wolf of Wall Street*]





The very unreliable narrator: In the closing sequence from *The Wolf of Wall Street*, the real Jordan Belfort [top left] introduces a construction of himself as interpreted by Leonardo DiCaprio [top right].





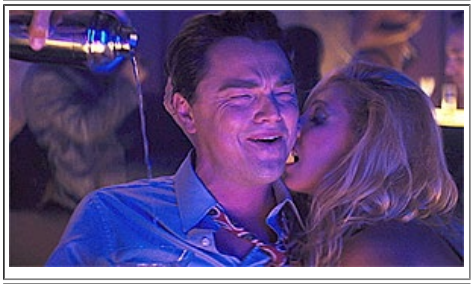
Danny Porush [bottom right] threatened to sue the producers of *Wolf* if they didn't change his name, and so Jonah Hill [bottom left] plays Danny in the guise of Donny Azoff. After seeing the trailer of the movie, Porush said in *Mother Jones* magazine that "the book…is a distant relative of the truth, and the film is a distant relative of the book." But Porush went on to say, "Hey it's Hollywood. I'm not a communist; I know they want to make a movie that sells." For an assessment of *Wolf's* accuracy to actual events, see these *Hollywood vs. History* and *Slate* articles.

In *The Wolf of Wall Street,* the opening montage of self-described "degenerate" debauchery, which includes "dwarf-throwing" and profligate indulgences, is a warning to the audience that every effort will be made to offend us. We are ushered through a hedonistic false paradise where Belfort and his merry band of anti-heroes reject the constraints of conventional morality in favor of self-destructive nihilism. Scorsese charts the rise and fall of the stockbrokers with the same visceral energy and dark humor that he applied to the rise and fall of the mobsters in *Goodfellas* and *Casino* (1995).

The film has many images of the characters' outlandishly excited facial expressions and bodily gestures. These encourage an association with the grotesque imagery found in the paintings of Bosch, Brueghel and other artists who have created orgiastic visions of sin and hell, often taking inspiration from Dante's *Inferno*. In addition to considering the film's representation of actual events, if *Wolf* is taken allegorically, the Belfort character can be seen as metaphorically escorting the viewer through the vestibule of hell on a tour of the seven deadly sins but without the guidance of a Virgil or Beatrice or the promise of salvation.





Detail from *Christ Carrying the Cross* (c. 1515) by Bosch. Members of the crowd taunt one of the thieves that will be crucified along with Christ.	*Wolf's* opening sequence of debauchery is the cinematic equivalent of Dante's "abandon all hope" sign at the gates of hell.
	
Mark Hanna makes a sale on the trading floor.	Jordan learns the ropes.



Dressed for success in the casual environment of the Investor's Center, Jordan impresses his future disciples by showing them how to walk on the water.



The closest we get to a Beatrice who will lead Jordan out of turpitude is his first wife, Teresa (Cristin Milioti). Betraying a working class allegiance, she suggests, "Wouldn't you feel better if you sold that stuff to rich people who can, like, afford to lose all that money." Jordan eventually adopts the suggestion but it just leads to more turpitude and the end of their relationship.

In an early sequence we find Jordan (Leonardo DiCaprio) newly arrived on Wall Street having lunch at an upscale restaurant with top stockbroker Mark Hanna (Matthew McConaughey). As yet uncorrupted, Jordan drinks water while Hanna has martinis and snorts coke with impunity. Hanna lays out his cynical view of Wall Street: Nobody knows if the stock market is going up or down so "fuck the clients" and "move the money from your client's pocket into your pocket." Capitalism is defined as a zero sum game by Hanna who has presented the receptive Jordan with a blueprint for success that depends on fraud and greed and springs from malice aforethought.

Shortly after obtaining his brokers license, Jordan loses his job in the wake of the crash of 1987. He finds another job selling penny stocks at the "Investor's Center," a ramshackle firm in Long Island. Leading by example, Jordan quickly impresses his colleagues with his natural ability to pitch a sow's ear as if it were a silk purse. He sells worthless stock at a premium price to people who really can't afford it: "Selling garbage to garbage men," as he puts it. "The other guy's looked at me as if I just discovered fire," says Belfort, who is on his way to becoming a charismatic idol, a false god, revered and worshiped by loyal employees whose primary goal is to accumulate as much wealth as possible, regardless of the moral cost.

In the next sequence, Donnie Azoff (Jonah Hill) approaches Jordan for the first time and they begin an alliance that will eventually lead to each other's downfall. Even though Jordan has the finely tailored suit, makes $70,000 a month and drives the flashy sports car, it's Donnie, employed at a children's furniture store and wearing a ridiculous multi-colored patchwork shirt, who maintains the position of power throughout the sequence.







Hanna may have introduced Jordan to the role that drugs can play in fueling his success, but it's Donnie who puts the crack pipe in Jordan's mouth. The film's characters' open embrace of a subprime morality is frequently expressed through an association with the grotesque imagery and caricature found in a host of art forms, for example the gargoyle from the Paisley Abbey in Scotland.

Synthesizing his experience at the establishment firm of L. F. Rothschild on Wall Street with the working class Investor's Center, Jordan rents an abandoned gas station and starts a business with the lofty sounding name of Stratton Oakmont. Jordan refers to his new easily-corrupted, dope-dealing employees as a "crew," and they are hired and treated as a crew is in a heist movie. The startup company eventually moves into a new office space located in the aptly named Village of Lake Success. After the publication of a negative article about Jordan and his company in *Forbes* magazine, droves of young man, disciples that come to be known as "Strattonites," flock to his office begging for a chance to work for him.



ON THE MARGIN
UP & COMERS

Former meat broker Jordan Belfort now pushes dicey stocks.

Steaks, stocks—what's the difference?

By Roula Khalaf

At 23, Jordan Belfort was peddling meat and seafood door-to-door on New York's Long Island and dreaming of getting rich. Within months, he was running a string of trucks, moving 5,000 pounds of beef and fish a week. But he expanded too quickly on too little capital. By the time he was 25, he filed for personal bankruptcy.

"I was pretty talented," shrugs the smooth-talking Belfort, now 29. "But the margins were too small."

Looking for a product with more fat in it, Belfort found stocks. Steaks, stocks—from a hustling salesman's standpoint, what's the difference? Today Belfort's two-year-old Stratton Oakmont brokerage, operating out of Lake Success, N.Y., specializes in pushing dicey stocks on gullible investors. And while the product may be as perishable as meat and fish, the margins do appear quite handsome. Stratton's total commission revenues should hit $80 million this year. The firm now boasts nearly 150 brokers. Belfort, who owns over 50% of Stratton's equity, may have personally made $3 million last year alone.

Belfort's customers, on the other hand, haven't always shared in this prosperity. A year ago, even before customers began lodging complaints, the Securities & Exchange Commission started investigating Stratton Oakmont's sales and trading practices. Subpoenas have been issued to a number of Stratton Oakmont's former brokers. Belfort confirms the investigation and says the firm is cooperating fully.

The Queens born son of two accountants, Belfort earned a biology degree from American University. After failing in the meat business, he learned the stock brokerage business at a succession of shops—L.F. Roth-

Stratton Oakmont President Jordan Belfort
"A story only lasts for so long."

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Forbes ■ October 14, 1991

[*Forbes* republished the 1991 article](#) about Belfort after the release of *Wolf of Wall Street* saying that Scorsese and DiCaprio were less interested "in the true facts of Belfort's life and actual details of his securities crimes than in showing off more and more lewd behavior."



Originally upset by the *Forbes* article, Jordan comes to realize that, as Teresa insisted, "There's no such thing as bad publicity." Droves of young men compete to join the ranks of Stratton Oakmont.



Ben Younger's excellent family melodrama *Boiler Room* (2000) with Giovanni Ribisi, offers another version of the Belfort story but from the point of view of the young Strattonites, although, no doubt for legal reasons, there is not a single mention of Belfort or Stratton Oakmont in the movie or in the accompanying DVD commentary.

The now successful firm employs hundreds of traders and brokers. Celebrating end-of-month gross sales totaling over $28 million, Jordan orchestrates a "weekly act of debauchery" that includes the performance of an underwear-clad marching band, tuxedoed waiters serving champagne, dozens of strippers, and a pantomime of orgiastic behavior by the employees who are showered by confetti that falls

impossibly from ceiling panels while florescent tubes flicker like strobe lights. The conservative underwear of the marching band is contrasted with the pasties, teddies and g-strings worn by the strippers as the soundtrack transitions from John Phillip Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever* to Howlin' Wolf's *Smokestack Lightning*. The contradiction between a surrealistic idealization of American success (Sousa/marching band) and its harsher reality (strippers/Howlin' Wolf) collide graphically and aurally.



The self-satisfied Jordan: He first surrendered to intemperance and then unleashed it into his newly created empire.



He lords over the celebratory 'bull worshipers' like Aaron at the Adoration of the Golden Calf.



Moral parables abound, as do allusions to religious imagery from other eras throughout. Aaron and the Israelites worship a graven image in *The Worship of the Egyptian Bull God, Apis* (c. 1500) by Filippino Lippi.



Meanwhile on Mount Sinai God commands Aaron's younger brother Moses that "thou shalt not." *The Adoration of the Golden Calf* (c. 1633) by Nicolas Poussin.

Along with his white Ferrari, "humongous estate," "two perfect kids," yachts and many other luxurious belongings that we see during the opening montage, Naomi (Margot Robbie), Jordan's second wife, is presented as another of Jordan's prized possessions. As she's being introduced, the former model and Miller Lite girl "strikes a pose" and is the first to break the fourth wall when she provocatively looks into the camera, either as if admiring her own reflection in a mirror or acknowledging the presence of the audience with a flirtatious gaze. The viewers are voyeurs not simply to the characters' sexual exploits but as peeping toms peering into a world of pornographic wealth that can only be experienced vicariously through passive watching, like viewing an episode of the old Robin Leach TV series *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*: "champagne wishes and caviar dreams."






Who's looking at whom? Naomi (Margot Robbie) looks at us looking at her. Does the presentation of Jordan's possessions in the opening montage implicate the viewer in an act of envy? Only the viewer can say.

Jordan is the next to break the fourth wall with his soliloquy about his use of recreational drugs during which his African American maid and chauffer open and close doors for him and presumably are there to clean up the glass goblet of orange juice that he tosses to the ground where it shatters. Naomi, the Strattonites, the maid and the chauffer are portrayed as objectified beings that have a specific and limited purpose.




The Master-Servant Rule is a legal term for the employer-employee association that is rooted in feudalism and is still in use today. It can be applied to Jordan's relationship with his household servants as well as his employees at Stratton Oakmont. According to Black's online Law Dictionary, a servant (employee) "remains entirely under the control and direction of [his/her master]."



The trade off is that the Master Servant Rule also states that employers (masters) are responsible and accountable for the negligent actions of their employees regardless of the employers' awareness of their actions. Apparently the rule was not applied to any of the senior executives of financial institutions responsible for the 2008 Crisis. Nor, except for one case, was any law applied to the low or middle level players who evaded prosecution in spite of widespread proof of systemic fraud.

At his office, Jordan begins to explain what an IPO is to the viewer when he stops himself and smugly declares to us,

> "Look, I know you're not following what I'm saying anyway, right? That's okay. That doesn't matter. The real question is this: was all this legal? Absolutely fucking not."

Like the voice-over narration, the breaking of the fourth wall via Jordon's

acknowledgment of the camera/audience becomes a confessional in which with a nod and a wink he can strip away the veil of hypocrisy and rationalizations and explain the nature and purpose of his legal and moral transgressions.



Hanna, Donnie and Naomi represent a fool's paradise of malice, gluttony and lust. Jordan is tearing through the seven deadly sins on a hedonistic rampage for pleasure and material gratification, the cost of which is deferred, but inevitable spiritual anguish, another recurring theme in Scorsese's work.



Wolf of Wall Street as a compendium of cardinal vices:

- Gluttony [top]—Jordan loads up on Quaaludes, food and drink before an important business meeting. To the right, a detail from Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Seven Vices—Gluttony* (1558).
- Sloth [middle]—detail from *Parable of the Wheat and the Tares* (1624) by Abraham Bloemaert. The lazy peasants sleep while the devil, in the background, sows weeds among the wheat. To the right, the depleted revelers sleep as Jordan, the first to rise, stumbles through the debris left in the wake of his Las Vegas bachelor party.
- Wrath [bottom]—The honeymoon is over. Spousal rape and other acts of violence near the end of the film, signal the end of marriage number two. To the right, a detail from *Anger* (c. 1642) byJacques de l' Ange, one of a series of seven painting depicting the Seven Deadly Sins.





Once at the office, Jordan continues to address the viewer. He snorts a line of coke with a hundred dollar bill and tosses it into a wastebasket, making the connection between drug dependency and addiction to wealth.

By the end of the movie Jordan has lost his family, is estranged from his colleagues, most of whom he's betrayed, and sent to prison. Upon his release he works as a motivational speaker engaging his novice audience in a basic "sell me this pen" exercise.

After much drama, Jordan's end is rife with loneliness and despair. It's like the end suffered by other Scorsese anti-heroes. Middleweight champion Jake LaMotta in *Raging Bull* ends up as an entertainer at a cheap nightclub; billionaire Howard Hughes in *The Aviator* is trapped in a bathroom with his own circular obsessive thoughts; Henry Hill in *Goodfellas* lives the life of a "nobody" after enrolling in the Witness Protection Program.

As everything unravels near the end of *Goodfellas*, you can hear one of the wise guys being led out by the police say something like: Why don't you go to Wall Street and catch some real criminals? As everything unravels by the end of *Wolf of Wall Street,* there is little doubt left about how success in the financial market can be gamed. At the end of *Casino,* the De Niro character laments his lost "paradise on earth": the casinos are demolished and the mob is evicted by corporate America that uses junk bonds to rebuild Vegas in the image of a Disney-type theme park. The public is now fleeced at the gambling tables with the imprimatur of respectability that entertainment divorced from blatant, violent, criminality provides. Jordan Belfort, Bernie Madoff, Michael Milken, Ivan Boesky and Raj Rajaratnam are part of a criminal class of white collar free lancers who get caught and are tried and imprisoned. In contrast, the established, "too big to fail" financial institutions, pillars of U.S. capital supported by legislators and regulators, loot, pillage and plunder, rarely challenged by the proverbial long arm of the law.



Capitalism's invisible army: Richard Dreyfus as Bernie Madoff [left] is in a rage, not because his ponzi scheme has been found out, but because his scheme is not recognized as operating within the confines of a much larger ponzi scheme that went unpunished. In *The Good Shepherd* (2006, De Niro) [right] Matt Damon plays one of the founding fathers of the CIA. As U.S. business interests are endangered in circa 1960 Cuba, the Damon character enlists the help of the mob connected Pesci character by threatening him with deportation if he does not comply. ...



... It's no wonder that some like to refer to the CIA as Capitalism's Invisible Army. In a chilling bit of dialogue, after the Pesci character lists the life-affirming values of immigrants and African-Americans, although not using life-affirming language, he asks, "what about you people?" meaning WASPs. "What do you have?" To which the Damon character answers, "The United States of America, the rest of you are just visiting."

Go to page 3



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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Killing Them Softly (Dominik, 2012)

The crime movie *Killing Them Softly* was widely criticized for the heavy-handed use of news clips and speeches about the financial meltdown that make diegetic and non-diegetic appearances in likely and unlikely places. Disjointed pieces of Obama speeches are inserted into the opening title sequence, news reports play on the radio as hit men drive around looking for their mark; breaking news from a cable station plays on a TV at an illegal gambling joint that is being robbed. A connection to depression era gangster films is suggested through the sardonic use of depression era songs. "Life is a Bowl of Cherries" plays on the soundtrack to underline the temporary success of a holdup man, and later "It's only a Paper Moon," plays when the delusion that he will get away with stealing from the mob ends with his execution. [click here to see visual essay on films related to *Killing Them Softly*]



Frankie (Scoot McNairy) has a lot on his mind ...



... but it's probably not the upcoming election.



We wuz robbed: On the TV in the background, President Bush waxes poetic about the unfolding financial meltdown while Frankie and another lumpen street thug (Ben Mendelsohn) advise the gamblers to remain passive while they are being robbed because after all, "it's only money."



References to the financial meltdown aside, the movie is a faithful adaption of the 1974 dialogue-driven George V. Higgins novel, *Cogan's Trade*. Treading familiar territory, the film emphasizes the parallels between the social hierarchies of an organized criminal enterprise with those of a corporation. Like the previous cycle of anti-business films written about by Lopate, the top decision makers, referred to as "they" or "them," are absent and are represented by a surrogate named Driver (Richard Jenkins). Referred to as "counselor" on at least one occasion,



Executive decisions: Driver (Richard Jenkins) and Jackie (Brad Pitt) complain about their absent bosses and then figure out how to get the job done in spite of them.

Driver behaves like a public relations officer who wishes to project a veneer of respectability onto an illegal operation that out of necessity involves beatings and murder. The fastidious Driver, always dressed in a business suit, has a secretary and asks a hit man not to smoke in his car. Concerned with the cost of doing business he tries to save money by negotiating for a lower cost of a hit and wants a hired assassin to fly coach.

Driver meets with Jackie Cogan (Brad Pit), who plays the role of middle management charged with overseeing the dirty work that will be necessary. Driver wants Jackie to "talk" to Markie Trattman (Ray Liotta) about the holdup of a gambling operation Trattman runs. Jackie goads Driver into defining "talk," which of course means "beating." After Jackie makes the argument that it is more logical, efficient and humane to just kill Trattman, Driver explains that "they're squeamish" about murder and have a "total corporate mentality." As the Jack Nicholson and Paul Bethany characters' speeches imply in *A Few Good Men* and *Margin Call,* there is a de facto mechanism of plausible deniability in place: The corporate executives need to put a distance between the official policy (held by Driver and those he represents) and the actual execution of a tacit policy (as performed by Jackie and those he hires).



The Annual Performance Evaluation- Jackie sends two laborers (Max Casella and Trevor Long) skilled at the art of 'talking,' to visit Trattman (Ray Liotta).



The conversation gets out of hand and Trattman is badly beaten.

Two young upstarts who are cast as lumpen street thugs performed the actual hold up. One's a stoner (Scoot McNairy), the other a downright drug addict (Ben Mendelsohn). Every action that they take is a poorly planned scheme to get money that's doomed to failure or just absurd. One is eventually arrested; the other murdered by Jackie who winds up carrying out all of the murders because he can't seem to get good help. He tries hiring New York Mickey (James Gandolfini), a professional assassin, but Mickey is so thoroughly corrupted by a life of vice that he cannot be depended upon to do his job.



Good help is hard to find: Assassin New York Mickey (James Gandolfini) complains about the service he received from a prostitute, refuses to tip her, and then fails to do the job he

was hired to do.

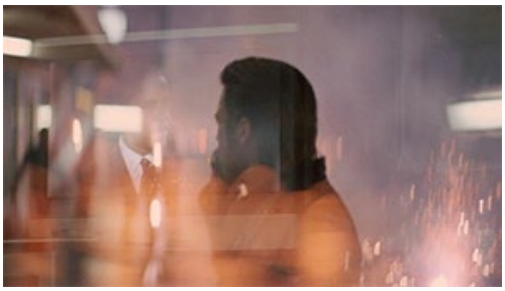


If you want something done right, do it yourself. ...



... In a nicely choreographed slow motion sequence, Jackie kills Trattman, softly.

All of the meetings with Driver, in fact, take place in the car that he is driving except the last, which takes place in a bar. Jackie passes through a shower of ostensibly Fourth of July fireworks and enters the bar where candidate Obama is making a speech. Jackie is upset because he feels he was short-changed by $15,000 for the three murders he committed. Driver tells Jackie that "they" told him to tell Jackie that those were "recession prices." Driver tries to explain that the business they are in is a "business of relationships" and aligns himself, bizarrely, with Obama's optimistic message coming from the TV. Jackie's not buying the message and connects it to Thomas Jefferson, whom he calls a "rich wine snob who was sick of paying taxes to the Brits." He argues that Jefferson was a hypocrite who used "lovely words" about equality to arouse "the rabble" and then allowed the children he fathered with Sally Hemings to live in slavery; likewise, Jackie asserts, Obama is using words to create an illusion of community that does not actually exist. With the "yes we can" chant blaring from the TV, Jackie, and the movie, imply no we can't. The movie ends with Jackie's declaration:



No we can't: Fresh from killing the last of the men that was preventing the resumption of business at the gambling operation, Jackie walks through a shower of 4th of July fireworks and enters the bar to collect his pay. ...

> "I'm living in America, and in America you're on your own. America's not a country; it's just a business. Now fucking pay me."

The cynical worldview presented in *Killing Them Softly* is a logical expression of the disengaged and disenfranchised, a natural reaction to dog-eat-dog inequity embedded in a have and have-not economy. The film accepts as a deterministic given, the every-person-for-themselves/might-makes-right philosophy of pessimism that is the child of this lumpen version of social Darwinism.



... The scene transition is accomplished through a slow dissolve. The sound of fireworks and the song *It's Only a Paper Moon* are slowly replaced with an Obama speech made on the barroom TV. It's back to business as usual.

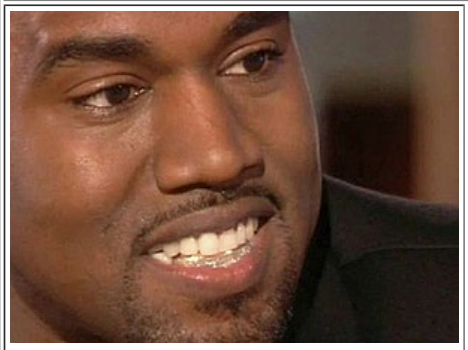
Cosmopolis (Cronenberg, 2012)

Cosmopolis is essentially a road trip movie in which Eric Packer (Robert Pattinson), a 28-year-old asset manager on a mission to get a haircut, takes the viewer on a tour of Manhattan that pits New York, the center of global capitalism, against New York, the city of neighborhoods. Though the distance traveled is only a few miles, the journey is epic and cataclysmic. [click here to open visual essay on films related to *Cosmopolis*]

The dialog, often described as stilted or stylized, is taken nearly verbatim from Bronx-born Don DeLillo's 2003 novel. As a consequence, some criticized the film, a large percentage of which takes place within the confines of a stretched limo, as talky and claustrophobic. But Cronenberg turns the limousine into a 360-degree movie set that at various moments serves as a meeting room, doctor's office, bedroom, or bathroom while assuming the ambiance of a space ship, game parlor, or tomb. Additionally, when the windows aren't set to darkroom black, the limo functions as a screening room in which its occupants passively witness urban normality devolve into the chaos visible through the vehicle's one-way glass panes.



Smile, capitalism loves you: The grill of this limo is the first image we see in the movie. The aesthetic weight of Cronenberg's movies often masks his sense of humor. I don't always get the joke, but it usually makes me smile.



Capitalism loves you too: Kanye West apparently replaced a section of his bottom teeth with a diamond studded pressurized carbon bridge, while Katy Perry took the more conservative approach to facial branding with a jewel encrusted clip-on celebrity grill that spells out the name of one of her hit songs, *Roar.*



One of *Cosmopolis'* themes includes the impact tremendous wealth has on identity formation in young adults, and the role that the cult of (celebrity) personality plays in that formation. The theme was further explored in Cronenberg's next movie, *Map to the Stars (2014).*



The root of all evil: In *Map to the Stars* (2014) Cronenberg examines wealth as a byproduct of youth and celebrity culture. Fresh out of rehab

Torval (Kevin Durand), Eric's personal bodyguard, tries to dissuade the strangely distant, emotionally deadpan Eric against the trip to the family barbershop. With the U.S. president in town, Torval warns that they will "hit traffic that speaks in quarter inches." More importantly, there is a lone assassin on the loose threatening to kill Eric. Eric doesn't care; he wants a haircut. His vehicle becomes a traveling office in which he meets with, among others, his twenty-something IT

14-year-old child TV star Benjie Weiss (Evan Bird) is trying to make a comeback. He backslides, shoots his friend's dog and then strangles the competition, a 4-year-old co-star. 'Success' just leads to identity confusion and dysfunction.

security analyst (Jay Baruchel), a 22-year-old currency analyst (Philip Nozuka), and a 41-year-old woman (Juliette Binoche) who buys art for the young billionaire. During the course of these meetings there are numerous philosophical discussions about technology, security, the acquisition and meaning of wealth and art, and the nature of reality. We also learn that Eric is in danger of losing his entire fortune because of a bad bet he's made against the yuan.



Poor little rich boy: Maybe Torval (Kevin Durand) is trying to protect Eric (Robert Pattinson) or maybe he just wants his workday to end a little earlier. After failing to coax Eric into using a more conveniently located barber, he warns Eric with unrestrained sarcasm that "the ride across town does not happen unless we make a day of it with cookies and milk." Eric is portrayed as a spoiled child that is on a journey that will necessitate the dismantling of his controlled environment.





View from the Prousted limo: The vehicle may be armored and Prousted—cork-lined (like the writer Marcel Proust's living quarters) against street noise—but there's no stopping the world from leaching in. Above, Samantha Morton as the "Chief of Theory" is not impressed but Eric's humanity begins to leach out.

The densest philosophizing happens during Eric's meeting with his "Chief of Theory" (Samantha Morton), during which anti-capitalist demonstrators try to overturn the lumbering vehicle as it crawls through midtown traffic. No matter the effort, the demonstrators can only superficially damage the armored and soundproof vehicle, which by now has clearly become a symbol of uncaring, unresponsive capitalism. The attempt to overturn the vehicle is experienced as an impudent and impotent rocking of the boat in which the occupants never feel threatened and are able to drink their Sobieski vodka without spilling a drop. During a lull in the philosophizing, the Chief of Theory turns to look out the window as if watching a TV screen and sees that one of the protestors is in flames. As if disappointed at having to watch a rerun, she complains that self-immolation is "not original," that it's an "appropriation" taken from Vietnamese monks. Looking beyond his advisor's views on social theory to the actual practice of martyrdom he's just witnessed, Eric, forty minutes into the movie, shows his first hint of humanity by sympathizing with the protestor. "Imagine the pain," says Eric. "To say something. To make people think."

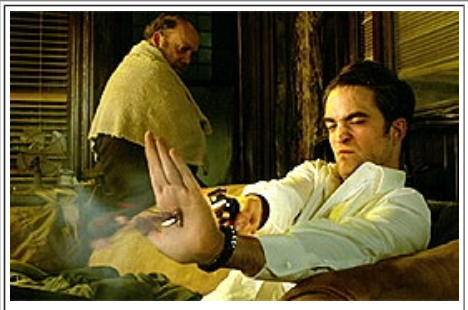
His astonishing wealth has afforded him the safe haven of his limo, a cocoon that has enabled Eric to physically and emotionally disconnect from ordinary human society. His reaction to the immolation, the threat on his life, and his impending financial ruin ignites an identity crisis fueled by a self-destructive exploration of pain. Pain becomes a pathway that will allow him to reconnect with the world that exists outside the vehicle. After having sex in a hotel with Kendra (Patricia McKenzie), one of the security agents assigned to him, Eric commands her to shoot him with her stun gun.





The agony and the ecstasy: Taking advantage of some downtime, Kendra (Patricia McKenzie) and Eric explore their sadomasochistic instincts in a hotel en route to the west side barbershop. Neither Torval nor Kendra, with their more working class responsibilities, ever enter the limousine's passenger section.

Near the end of the movie, desperate to feel something, even if it's his own pain, he enigmatically announces to his assassin or perhaps himself, "Violence needs a burden, it needs a purpose." Then Eric shoots himself through the hand. The further away from the financial district the vehicle gets, the more contact Eric has with people outside of his elite circle of contacts, the more he loses his sense of self, the more emotional he becomes, and the more he puts himself in danger.



Hand job: The parallels between Eric and Sol Nazerman (Rod Steiger) in *The Pawnbroker* (Lumet, 1964) extend far beyond the self-inflicted hand wound. Eric shoots himself in the hand with the gun he receives from the family barber. Sol, a holocaust survivor who has witnessed the death of his family, impales his hand on a letter spike, ...



... bleeding on the spent pawn tickets of the indigent people that frequent his shop and with whom he's been unsympathetic towards. For vastly different reasons, both characters are emotionally numb and socially isolated. They use the promise of pain as punishment or as a way to awaken themselves from their spiritual death.





DeLillo in his book and Cronenberg in his movie have taken the famous opening sentence of Karl Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* and turned it on its head. Through the limousine window, during the height of the demonstration, where there should be an ad or stock market ticker, the electronic billboard announces instead: A SPECTER IS HAUNTING THE WORLD—THE SPECTER OF CAPITALISM. Furthermore, *Cosmopolis* turns the Marxist notion of workers' alienation on its head by ruminating about the alienating effects of capitalism on capitalists with Eric Packer as its avatar. Eric's hyper veneer of self-control masks the out-of-control spoiled boy who gets what he wants because he can afford it, no matter how self-indulgent or absurd. He plans on putting a Heliport on the roof, and a shooting range in the building he owns. He has purchased and flown a 1980's Soviet-made supersonic bomber that use to carry nukes and cruise





Stained glass windows: There's a better view of Brutha Fez' (K' Naan) funeral procession from the limo's monitors than through the vehicles graffiti stained windows. Eric and Kosmo (Grouchy Boy) comfort each other.

missiles. He wants to buy Rothko's Chapel and store it in his apartment where he has two elevators to choose from depending on his mood: one elevator plays the music of Satie; the other, the music of a Sufi rapper named Brutha Fez (K' Naan). As the façade of self-control slowly deteriorates, Eric is humanized by his representation as a young person whose privileged life has perverted his social/emotional development, and inhibited his transition to adulthood.

After the immolation incident, Brutha Fez's record producer, Kosmo (Grouchy Boy), makes his way to the limo where he informs Eric that his rap star hero is dead. Buying into a media-created persona of the rap star, Eric assumes Fez was shot—a target of gang violence. Kosmo, sarcastically hoping that Eric isn't "disappointed," tells him that Brutha Fez died of natural causes after a lifetime of heart problems. Displaying the youthful exuberance of a fan of an iconoclastic musician, Eric has his second emotional response. Looking very much like a little boy in need of comfort, Eric tears up and falling on his knees, embraces the older man.

Eric's lack of maturity makes him incapable of having a meaningful intimate relationship with women. In addition to the hotel tryst with Kendra, Eric has some form of fleeting, impersonal sexual experience with two of the three women who enter the limo. In a marriage of convenience, Eric was recently wedded to the equally privileged Elise Shifrin (Sarah Gadon), a poet. Her status as a poet, made possible in part by her financial independence (old money), puts her in opposition to Eric. Eric's domain as an asset manager (new money) is material, practical and valued; Elise's status as a poet is ethereal and valueless in that it is utterly divorced from any meaningful economy. During the first five minutes of the movie Eric is wearing sunglasses. He takes them off upon meeting with Elise, who notices the color of her husband's eyes for the first time. She doesn't really know him yet she is the only character, with the possible exception of his assassin, that sees Eric for who he is. He pursues her for sex. She declines and will not enter his limo. She meets with Eric outside his sphere of influence: in a taxi, eateries, a bookstore, and out on the street in the theater district.

Saying she can't be "indifferent," Elise calls him on his obvious sexual escapades. He denies everything and responds to her observations with weak alternate explanations and sexual vulgarities designed to crack her cool exterior or deflect attention away from his indiscretions, neither of which happens. Failing that, as if to excuse the behavior, Eric confesses that he is facing financial ruin and a credible death threat, telling Elise "it makes me feel free in a way I've never known." Through his reckless behavior, Eric is freeing himself of his wealth, his sham marriage, and the security of the limousine and all that it represents. If Eric is the avatar of capitalism, his self-destructive behavior is analogous to the self-destructive nature of capitalism. While the story does not dismiss the role the demonstrators play in challenging the system, it strongly suggests that the system is collapsing under its own weight.

It's nighttime when Eric arrives at his destination in a deserted, undetermined (Hell's Kitchen in the novel), questionable neighborhood that has not yet been gentrified. Upon emerging from his motorized cocoon he is immediately assaulted by a pie assassin who is accompanied by an entourage of photographers and a videographer there to record the event, presumably for purposes of propaganda. Once again underscoring the attacks on capitalism by protestors as feeble, Torval quickly subdues the "pastry assassin," dismissively calling the attack a "petty incursion" that's "technically irrelevant." He's more concerned about the armed assassin that lies in wait.





Rosebud: “I gave this guy his furst haircut” says Anthony in his New York twang. The barbershop is Eric’s ‘Rosebud’—a place that represents a personal or spiritual loss. The barbershop is where Eric and his father, who died when he was five years old, use to get their haircut.



Petty incursion à la mode: His stated mission is to “sabotage power and wealth,” but the master pastry assassin’s (Mathieu Amalric) politics are fuzzy and he seems more skilled at creating a media event to promote his own antics. ...



... He brags that his previous victims have included the Sultan of Brunei, Michael Jordan and Fidel Castro, and while he selected Eric as a target over the President of the U.S. who is also in town, his big complaint against Eric is that he has a “lack of humor.”

Continuing on his path of self-destruction, Eric tricks Torval into handing over his high tech weapon and then uses it to kill him. Eric has murdered the man he hired to protect him and then walks into the neighborhood where both Anthony the barber (George Touliatos) and Benno Levin the assassin (Paul Giamatti) await. Once at the barbershop, Anthony and Eric reminisce. In the novel, Anthony recounts the overcrowded, humble living conditions experienced by Eric’s father, underscoring the family’s upwardly mobile trajectory. Eric’s mission for a haircut may start off symbolically representing the traditional financial meaning of haircut—to take a loss—but it also represents a return to a nostalgic idea of family that has disappeared from his life because of his wealth.

At their meeting in the cab, Elise explains that she learns about the world by “asking the drivers where they come from.” Knowledgeable and dispassionate, Eric replies, “They come from horror and despair.” After killing Torval, Ibrahim (Abdul Ayoola), Eric’s previously invisible chauffer becomes part of the story. Anthony and Ibrahim are both former cab drivers and share war stories. During the course of their conversation we learn that the African born Ibrahim, who is

badly scarred around one eye, was the “Acting Secretary of External Affairs” in his “previous life.” There is a cut to a shot of Eric in the barber’s chair, eyes rapidly shifting as if he is trying to process what he’s just heard. Global capitalism has, in essence, taken Ibrahim from an important position in the government of his home country and placed him first in a New York City cab, and then in the stretched limo, chauffeuring a master of capitalism accomplished in investing in foreign currency. The primary grievance made by anti-globalization activists about the end results of economic neoliberalism becomes manifest in the drama that is unfolding in the decaying family barbershop: increased inequity leading to families being uprooted by poverty and violence.



War **s**tories**:** Two former NYC cab drivers, Anthony the barber (George Touliatos) and Ibrahim the chauffer (Abdul Ayoola), advise the asset-manager on how to protect himself. When Anthony asks Ibrahim how he got the scar, Eric answers for him as if repeating a well-worn narrative: ....



... “You were beaten and tortured. An army coup. By the secret police. Or they thought they executed you. Fired a shot into your face. Left you for dead.” The chickens may come home to roost, but first they’ll drive our cabs.



In *Game 6 (*Hoffman, 2005)*,* written by DeLillo in 1991, the Michael Keaton character, a former cab driver, also shares war stories with another displaced cab driver. This time the driver in the film, which is supposed to take place in 1986, was the head of Neurosurgery before emigrating from USSR. The film shares other plot characteristics with *Cosmopolis* as well as well as DeLillo’s 1985 book *White Noise.*

Eric’s journey begins with the film’s opening shot of a row of identical white stretched limos and stone columns, an image that suggests wealth, power, uniformity and stability; it closes with imagery that suggests the opposite: poverty, powerlessness and chaos. An assassin, head covered in a stained, threadbare towel, interacts with his financially ruined target in a dilapidated and cluttered squatters’ tenement. When the limo pulls away from the curb in the financial district it is in pristine condition. By the end of the movie the vehicle is dented and filthy with anarchist graffiti. Like the limo that’s taken him to this final destination, Eric’s appearance has also degenerated. In a series of succeeding scenes, he loses first his sunglasses, then his tie, and then his jacket. By the end of the movie he’s an un-tucked shirt with remnants of pie matted to a half-finished haircut that’s as asymmetrical as his prostate that he frets about during the entire

movie.





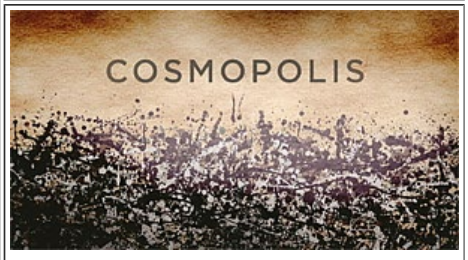
Before and after: As Eric Packer gets closer to his destination, his appearance, his environment and his situation becomes more chaotic and degenerates.

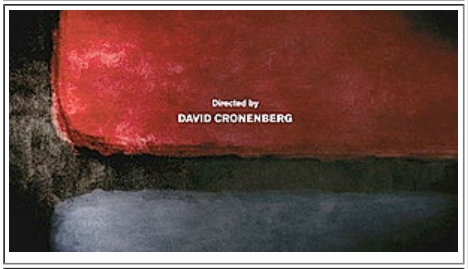




The same can be said for his white stretched limousine that pulls away from the curb at the beginning of the movie as a fetishized object.

It disappears into the garage at the end of the movie as a battered allegory.





The choice of background images for the opening and closing credits are ripe for multiple interpretations. The Pollock-esque opening credits suggest chaos while the closing Rothko-esque images suggests a meditative calm, putting into question, or reversing, the meaning of the opening and closing representations of Eric and his limo (from order to disorder).

Or perhaps the viewer may be left thinking about the violent deaths the artists (and Eric) came to in spite of their vastly different aesthetic approaches to their work; or maybe we are left to ponder the absurd market value of art work that has become more a commodity to be owned by the wealthy, than a cultural artifact that is shared with the public.



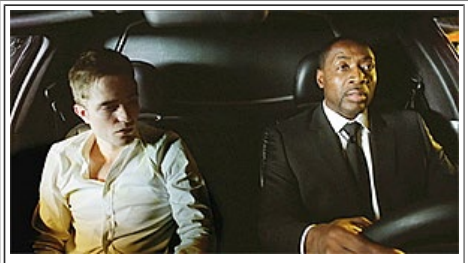


Cosmic Bookends: As in *Cosmopolis, t*he opening and closing credits in *Map to the Stars* are also used for commentary. The map to the stars in the opening credits (left) refers to a street map of the homes of Hollywood movie stars.

In the closing credits of *Map to the Stars*, after the unfolding tragic events, the map of stars we are shown refers to the constellation (right).

Before his encounter with Benno the assassin, a former employee, the expatriate chauffer and the global capitalist embrace. Ibrahim drives the limo into a garage in an industrial section of the city where it disappears, damaged but not

destroyed.





Solidarity: Eric and Ibrahim share the cab of the limo while Eric wonders where all the limos go when they are not in use. The question is given a fanciful answer in Leos Carax' *Holy Motors*. Released the same year as *Cosmopolis*, the Franco-German production also prominently features a white stretched limo and all the wonderful and horrible things that enter and exit the vehicle. In the last scene of the movie, the limousines complain about being exploited, overworked, underappreciated and fret about their inevitable obsolescence. A global chorus of languages and accents are heard while taillights flicker as they 'speak.'

In the long last sequence that takes place between Eric and Benno, we learn what unites them—they both have asymmetrical prostates and an almost erotic fondness for and understanding of foreign currency—and what divides them—Benno embraces asymmetry and claims Eric's failure to do so led to his misunderstanding of the yuan and thus his downfall. The film ends with Benno pointing his weapon at the back of the head of the compliant Eric, tear streaming from his eye, then a cut to black. As in the scene with Kendra, we never find out if the trigger is pulled.

In DeLillo's book, Kendra does in fact shoot Eric with the stun gun at full voltage and while we do not witness Benno pulling the trigger, in the last paragraph Benno is referred to as "his murderer" and Eric is left "waiting for the shot to sound." And so the story, Eric's life, and the fate capitalism, ends with an uncertain whimper and not with a definitive bang.



Capitalism does not like you: This is the last image we see in the movie. Richard Sheets, who prefers the *nom de guerre* Benno Levin (Paul Giamatti), is a disgruntled employee who was really hoping the system would work out for him. He delivers the last lines of the movie before the cut to black: "I wanted you to heal me. Save me. I wanted you to save me."

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Too Big to Fail and *The Big Short*

As non-fiction books that were made into popular dramatized movies, *Too Big to Fail* and *The Big Short* make for a good comparison, especially in how they differ, and the differences are considerable. [click here to see films related to *Too Big to Fail* and *The Big Short*]

In the eBook version of Andrew Ross Sorkin's 2009 best seller *Too Big to Fail,* a search for the word "greed" brought up eleven instances of the words "greed" or "greedy," two instances of the word "disagreed," and ninety-four instances of the word "agreed" as in:

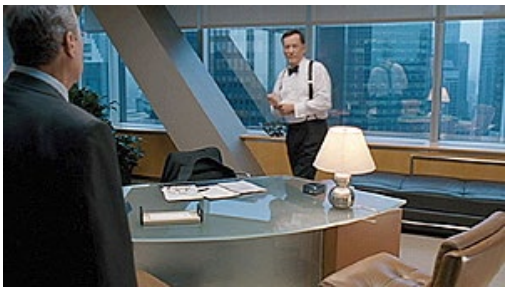
- "The Federal Reserve had agreed to take on up to $30 billion of loses" (p.10),
- "Thain and Thornton had agreed to support Paulson" (p. 137),
- "AIG agreed to pay $126 million to settle criminal and civil charges" (p. 155),
- "Bernanke and Paulson had agreed that the time had come for a systemic solution" (p. 418), and
- "Merrill agreed to pay him a bonus of $39.4 million in cash" (p. 559).

The use of the word "agreed" demonstrates how the bankers and regulators were permitted to "agree" on how to "resolve" the catastrophe they caused, effectively leaving the wolves in charge of the henhouse. The use of the word "greed," in one case, was used to positively affirm the character of the former head of Lehman Brothers: "Fuld seems to have been driven less by greed than by an overpowering desire to preserve the firm he loved." (p. 535) Most of the other instances of the word greed are attributable to book reviewers and journalists in the "praise for" opening pages, or whose work is cited in the footnotes and bibliography.

As arbitrary and out of context as the quotes may be, they define the character of the book, which by all accounts was meticulously researched and is an accurate representation of how the Crisis of 2008 unfolded and was handled. While there is value in learning about the family backgrounds and personal histories of the financiers that rule the economy—to find out how they think, speak and act—in the attempt to create a day-to-day "fly-on-the-wall" reality by using an objective reportorial voice, the larger significance behind those thoughts, words and deeds are lost in a fog of details. At least it was for me. More important, the objective statement of facts over even a flawed analysis of what transpired has allowed the author's characters to control the nonfiction narrative—something that is even more apparent in the HBO movie (Hanson, 2011). The end effect is that, like beauty, the identification of fraud, collusion and corruption is in the eye of the beholder.

In other words, the laissez-faire recording of factual information contained in Sorkin's book has allowed the very people that caused the crisis because of their advocacy, policies and behavior to walk away from the Crisis looking like the guys that saved the day. This may explain why in a review of the HBO movie, a *New York Times* critic took the line of blaming the victim by saying,

> "Mr. Sorkin's take on the story is the conventional one. That doesn't make it wrong. Presidents back to Reagan overderegulated (sic) the financial industry. Borrowing became too easy, especially for houses



Masters of the universe vs. the slaves of reality: Says Dick Fuld (James Woods) to his COO, Joe Gregory (John Heard), "You know people act like we're crack dealers. Nobody put a gun to anybody's head and said, 'Hey nimrod, buy a house you can't afford and you know what, while you're at it put a line of credit on that baby and buy yourself a boat.'"

(sic). People got in over their heads. When they couldn't pay back their debts, they dragged the banks (and one insurance company, A.I.G.) down with them."



Gregory laughs at his boss' joke, as did I, but Gregory is probably in good humor because the 20-minute door to door helicopter commute from his Suffolk County home to his Time Square office has kept him off the Long Island Rail Road, the Long Island Expressway, the MTA Subway system, and away from the likes of you and me.

Yes of course, the people dragged the banks and A.I.G. down causing the Financial Meltdown. Damn people! The priviledged's condescending attitude toward and isolation from working people are pervasive throughout the book and are crystallized in the opening of Chapter 17 of Sorkin's book where we find Tim Geithner "tired and stressed" on his morning jog at the southern tip of Manhattan "as he stared at the Statue of Liberty and the first of the morning's commuter ferries from Staten Island" made their way to work. Suddenly we find ourselves in the italicized world of Geithner's head:

> *"This is what it is all about—the people who rise at dawn to get in to their jobs, all of whom rely to some extent on the financial industry to help power the economy. Never mind the staggering numbers—nor the million-dollar bonuses of those that made bad bets. This is what saving the financial industry is really about,* he reminded himself, *protecting ordinary people with ordinary jobs."*

Geithner's bizarre epiphany, a version of which is depicted in the movie, represents an apologist's worldview of a system that *has* failed ordinary people with ordinary jobs while attempting to make the apologist look heroic. That same worldview is at work throughout the entire book and the movie.



Chock full of hubris: Ordinary people (without helicopters) on their way to ordinary jobs are noticed by ...



... the extraordinary Tim Geithner (Billy Crudup) out for his morning jog.



Band of insiders: Nancy Pelosi (Linda Glick) surrounded by the usual suspects; on the right, the bankers. ...



... Everybody is waiting for another group of insiders to arrive: the regulators. Together they will fight the good fight. There's talk of nationalizing the banks, but not really.

In the introduction to *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine* (2010), Michael Lewis explains that he wrote *Liar's Poker,* the 1989 book about his experiences as a bond salesman on Wall Street, as a cautionary tale to warn young people away from the lure of money in favor of pursuing "their passions or even their faint interests." Expecting the reader to be appalled by an "unsustainable" system that required fraud, Lewis was surprised to find himself "knee-deep in letters from students... who wanted to know if I had any other secrets to share about Wall Street. They'd read my book as a how-to manual." In writing *The Big*



Bottom feeders: Jamie (Finn Wittrock) and Charlie (John Magaro) catch wind of the housing bubble but as newcomers without a connection to the "big boys" they lack the billion plus dollars needed for the "ISDA Agreement" that will allow them to make high level trades. ...

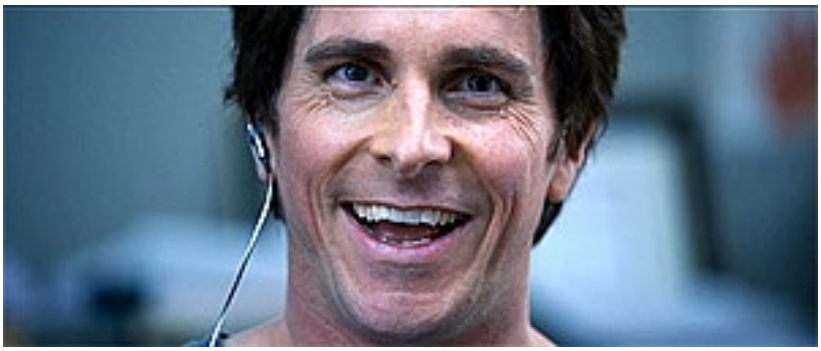


... Eventually they convince germaphobe, survivalist and former trader Ben Rickert (Brad Pitt) to channel his hatred for Wall Street and help them do what no one else has done: short the 'double A' tranches. "Kind of brilliant," says Rickert, "They'll [the banks] take every dime we have to offer," and get 10 or 20 to 1 payouts.

Short, Lewis tries to re-direct that misreading.

The Big Short, both book and movie (McKay 2015), represents the financial market as a beast without a brain or heart that is buttressed by a use of language designed to keep outsiders at a distance by making them feel "bored and stupid." Financial discourse is obfuscating rather than illuminating, and it has the end goal of making sure that the banks are left alone to do exactly as they please. "It's like two plus two equals fish!" says one of the film's characters, exasperated by the rating agencies failure to downgrade the subprime bonds that allowed the value of the bundled mortgages to go up even as large numbers of people default on their loans.

The characters in *The Big Short* live and work in a twilight zone somewhere between the insiders presented in *Too Big to Fail,* and the outsiders, or the outlaws in *The Wolf of Wall Street*. They want the wealth and are willing to play the game, but they also "distrust the system" and are represented as being acutely adverse to avarice and fraud. Their motivation to profit in the marketplace is less dependent on exploiting the public and more concerned with thumbing their noses at the Wall Street establishment while remaining, in some measure, very much a part of that establishment. Sitting at the top of the economic food chain, investment banks treat the insurgent capitalists like freaks and weirdoes who don't know their assets from their elbows. As such, the characters in *The Big Short* are like the children in Hans Christian Anderson's tale, pointing their fingers at the Emperor and his sycophants, exposing their naked ambition, vanity, arrogance, and finally their avaricious stupidity.



Rain Man – Afflicted with Asperger's Syndrome, Michael Burry (Christian Bale), a formerly practicing medical doctor whose way with numbers led him to success as a hedge fund manager, wears T-shirts and shorts and goes barefoot around his office, has a penchant for heavy metal drumming, and also for reading through tomes of mind-numbing prospectuses. Burry's special talent for detail enables him to see what nobody else sees, a housing bubble, and is compelled to take advantage of a financial opportunity of a lifetime in spite of the objections of his apoplectic clients and backers whose money he manages and controls.



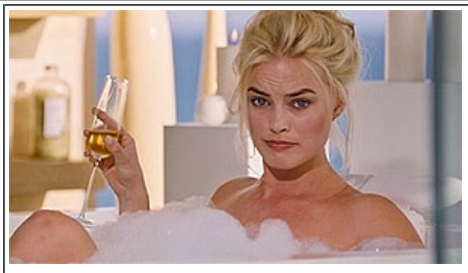
It lives again! Hell-bent on shorting the



... They mock him as he leaves their

bubble, Burry puts on a suit and visits the top investment banks and convinces them to rejigger the credit default swap originally created by the twenty-somethings that worked for JP Morgan in 1994. The newly designed CDS would specifically apply to a new frontier of home mortgages. The bankers think he's crazy for shorting what they see as a stable market. ...	offices. Says one Goldman Sachs exec, "This is Wall Street Dr. Burry, if you offer us free money we are going to take it." Burry buys $1.3 billion dollars of the home mortgage CDSs; when the bubble bursts he makes a total profit of $2.69 billion for himself and the clients who heretofore were threatening to sue.
	
Heard it through the grapevine: At a party, Jared Vennett (Ryan Gosling)—the narrator of the movie—finds out that someone, Burry, is spending hundreds of millions of dollars on custom-made home mortgage CDSs. After investigating, Vennett goes looking for investors willing to make the bets. ...	... A serendipitous wrong number connects Vennett to the boys at FrontPoint (from left, Hamish Linklater, Rafe Spall, Steve Carell, and Jeremy Strong), an autonomous arm of Morgan Stanley. After conducting field research based on Vennett's proposal, FrontPoint follows Burry's lead and starts buying the new swaps.

Shot in the style of a reality TV show or mockumentary like *The Office* TV series, *The Big Short* features three parallel stories that follow three separate groups of money managers who will never meet each other but whose experiences converge at the same point of crisis and dubious success. Adam McKay, Saturday Night Live writer and writer/director of many Will Ferrell movies, took on the task of demystifying arcane verbiage and abstruse concepts with humor and through bold asides that don't just break, but at times deconstruct the fourth wall. McKay's movie deviates from the book by taking these dramatic liberties while remaining true to the source material and its historical context.

	
	
The deconstruction zone: Clockwise from upper left, from her distracting bubble bath, Margot Robbie suggests that investment banks use language as a weapon of distraction and tells us that "Whenever you hear 'subprime,' think 'shit.'" Describing himself as a "crafty and morally onerous chef" Anthony Bourdain scoops up three day old fish ripe for the compost heap and "turns it into a whole new thing," a seafood stew that is analogized as a CDO (collateralized debt obligation). Elsewhere the CDO is analogized as "dog shit wrapped	

in cat shit." A pop singer, an economist, and betting onlookers at a gambling table in Las Vegas, illustrate the complexities of a synthetic CDO.



House of Jenga: Vennett uses the block-stacking game Jenga to set-up the Bourdain seafood stew analogy, and completes the picture of how the tranches in a CDO crashed the housing market. The visual aid is used to a better effect than the sundry, line, bar, pie, or scatter charts presented in many of the documentaries on the subject.



Moody blues: "How can Standard and Poor's help you?" asks Melissa Leo playing one of the "whores at the ratings agency." She must explain to the "naïve" boys at FrontPoint how competition on Wall Street works. "If we don't give [the banks] the [triple A] ratings, they'll go to Moody's, right down the block," and that's "the way the world works." After being shamed because of her inaction by the boys from FrontPoint, she calls them out on their own hypocrisy as owners of swaps about to enrich themselves by betting on the crash. Oh yes, and then there's the metaphor of the willfully blind leading the willfully rich.

Regardless of the political or narrative mission of the various documentaries, fiction, or fictionalized films that explore the post 2008 political economy, one important aspect they all have in common is to make the tortuous, unnatural, hermetically sealed world of 21st century capitalism accessible for fear of losing audience interest. To do so they must dissect the institutions, the language, the law, and examine how those factors impact individuals in diverse social groups. And they must do so while entertaining a mass audience. The movies presented here do more than an adequate job of unpacking many of those factors in order to educate that sizable social group of uninitiated outsiders, often referred to as the 99%, who like myself have been largely ignorant of, or have had only a tenuous understanding of how the economy actually works. Yet, in spite of my recent education I still find myself thinking, "A synthetic collateralized debt obligation means what?"

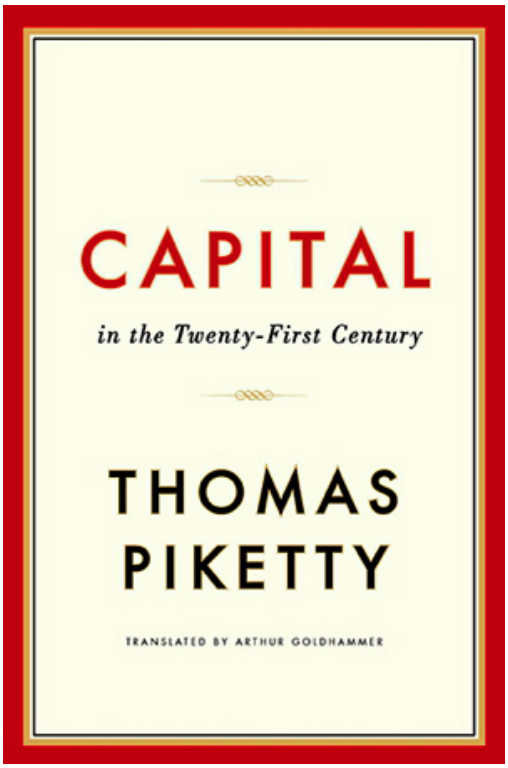
Conclusion: the S word



Carefully taught – "Mom, dad, do you have anal sex too?" reads the poster. Fearing that children were being recruited into the ranks of the depraved, a member of a school board called the new rainbow curriculum of tolerance "dangerously misleading lesbian/homosexual propaganda." Parents took their children to the streets, providing them with a lesson in civics about the rights to freedom of assembly, association and speech, while also teaching

I began my career as a New York City teacher amid a storm of controversy concerning three pages of a 443-page tolerance curriculum that referenced gay men and lesbians. In 2014 the NYC Department of Education introduced a clearly delineated and evolving four-page set of guidelines on how to support transgender students that was posted on their website with little, if any objection. As an admittedly pessimistic sixty-one-year-old, I never thought that so many social developments would be actualized so suddenly, in so rapid a succession, and during my lifetime. Decades of struggle by "single issue" grassroots movements have somehow coalesced into a strangely amorphous whole that appears to be

them all kinds of nonsense that was never in the original curriculum.



Soon to be a major motion picture. I read the introduction and the conclusion but when coming across the all-important "first fundamental law of capitalism," (α = r × β) I felt bored and stupid. Maybe the movie will help.

moving more or less in the same direction. [click here to see films related to the Conclusion]

The United States has had an African American president. Same-sex marriage is now legal throughout the United States. Even rank and file Republicans question their leaders' failure to acknowledge the science of climate change, as well as their failure to allow passage of even modest gun control legislation in the wake of recurring mass slaughter. Medical and recreational use of marijuana is on the road to decriminalization and possible legalization, and racial profiling and excessive force by the police have become part of the "national conversation." For the first time a woman was nominated as president of a major political party. While she was not elected, her rejection may have had less to do with her gender, than what she represented to a disaffected electorate. While these developments have caused reactionary backlash as indicated by the election of Trump, and spikes in violence, and oppression of all types still clearly exists, the secret's out: there are no more taboos. Everything is up for discussion and possible acceptance, except for a consumer comparison of available political economies: the last media-imposed taboo.

The legacy of the Red Scare and Cold War paranoia that led to redbaiting and blacklisting, the self-interest freely exercised by a handful of media conglomerates that control 90% of our news and entertainment, and the corporate money that funds a restrictive two-party system that cannot possibly represent the full spectrum of ideological beliefs held by the populace—all these have cuffed the democratic process by guaranteeing uninterrupted gridlock and putting a halt to any meaningful discussion of a consumer's guide to comparative economies. To entertain an alternative to capitalism or to even suggest its major re-engineering is to risk the possibility of being labeled as un-American, a naive idealistic utopian, an ivory tower academic, a dupe of some foreign ideology, or as just plain stupid.

Like most baby-boomers born in the United States, I was raised to believe that the telephone, motion picture camera, washing machine, Teflon, microchips, GPS technology, and solar panels are examples of innovations that are the result of the more positive aspects of capitalism: the willing exploitation of human ingenuity through creative entrepreneurialism, healthy competition, and the promise of personal reward. And while it's also true that capitalism has wrought the Pet Rock and the Snuggie, weapons of mass destruction and the greenhouse effect, gross economic inequity and the conflation of technological progress with human progress, my life-long indoctrination compels me still to embrace the baby while attempting to lose the bath water. Lately however, it seems the baby has gone missing while the bath water has become thick with muck. That's the implicit theme of the movies written about here. The films' portrayal of capitalism is missing the all-important inventive product and any hint of ingenuity, fairness or personal reward beyond the self-interests of an elite class of capitalist megalomaniacs.

The Financial Crisis of 2008 has spawn a cycle of popular films that question the superiority of our current economic system while refusing to reject it or to offer an alternative. But to offer an alternative would be an awkward imposition on the popular movie, to forego the emotional journey in favor of an intellectual pursuit. A film that had a didactic third act would most likely be viewed suspiciously as propaganda by an audience that expects to be entertained, maybe informed, possibly inspired, but never lectured to, even by films that appear to have a message that is socially relevant. Taken together, *Arbitrage, Margin Call, The Wolf of Wall Street, Killing Them Softly, Cosmopolis, The Big Short,* and *Too Big to Fail* are part of an ongoing rumination about the current state of predatory capitalism in the wake of what has come to be called the Great Recession. The rumination leads each of these post 2008 films to end with an inferred question



Agitprop 2016 USA: Eager to redbait Sanders on national TV, Senator Claire McCaskill complained, "I very rarely read in any coverage of Bernie that he's a socialist."



The New York Post was less subtle. The tabloid published the image on the right with an article titled "Don't be fooled by Bernie Sanders- he's a diehard communist." It's the kind of imagery that the far right and white supremacist groups are quite fond of.

mark as opposed to an emphatic exclamation point.

In the introduction to his widely praised book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, French economist Thomas Piketty, while highly critical of a ruling class that has perpetuated inequality since the industrial revolution, is also critical of that class's nemesis. He writes:

> "I belong to a generation that turned eighteen in 1989, which was not only the bicentennial of the French Revolution but also the year when the Berlin Wall fell... I was vaccinated for life against the conventional but lazy rhetoric of anticapitalism, some of which simply ignored the historic failure of Communism and much of which turned its back on the intellectual means necessary to push beyond it. I have no interest in denouncing inequality or capitalism per se—especially since social inequalities are not in themselves a problem as long as they are justified."

Instead Piketty says he is interested in contributing "to the debate about the best way to organize society and the most appropriate institutions and policies to achieve a just social order." In other words, to no doubt oversimplify, Piketty is rejecting the capitalism/socialism polarity as a false dichotomy and appears to be on a quest for a new economic paradigm.

The popular support that the Bernie Sanders campaign enjoyed from the Millennials demographic is both a compliment and counterpoint to Piketty's statement about the motivations of his generation. The Millennials, who now outnumber Baby Boomers in the United States, belong to a generation that not only came of age at the time of the 9/11 attacks but also witnessed the impact the Great Recession of 2008 had on their families, their own aspirations and their long term faith in capitalism as a tenable economic system. In other words, the Millennials enthusiastic support for the Sanders campaign suggests that they may be vaccinated for life against the conventional but lazy rhetoric of anti-socialism, some of which ignored the historic failure of capitalism in 2008.

The reaction to the evolving Sanders phenomenon on the part of the Democratic Party and various socialist groups has been instructive if predictable. After Sanders declared his candidacy in May 2015, Clinton supporter Sen. Claire McCaskill raised the specter of the hammer and sickle, while a writer from the Socialist Worker website lamented Sanders' "decisive break" from his hero Eugene Debs "who advocated for working class independence from the two capitalist parties."



Party line: All McCaskill and her counterparts need do is lazily drop a catch phrase or two, and the public's collective unconscious and the party line of the sundry socialist organizations- masters at alienating the public with their dogged insistence on using language and imagery anchored in the 20th if not the 19th century will do the rest.



Insults and injury: Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright warns women against voting for Sanders by declaring "there's a special place in hell for women that don't help each other."



Feminist icon Gloria Steinem castigates young woman by suggesting that they're for Bernie because "the boys are with Bernie." Both women expressed regret for their comments but the toothpaste never goes back in the tube.



Love train: With record-breaking crowds that number in the tens of thousands, Bernie wins the battle while losing the war. Not wanting to anger a constituency they are depending on in November, Democratic Party regulars put the hammer and sickle back in their toolbox; not wishing to discourage or alienate the ground swell of supporters, socialist groups accept Bernie's shortcomings.Clinton's move to the left thanks to the Sanders' campaign, was too little and too late. Meanwhile the Sanders' campaign has

succeeded in using the Great Recession to articulate the flaw in capitalism's pearl, and make the S word a lot less scary.

Bernie's talk of a "political revolution" and cautionary tales about the "billionaire class," and his self-effacing acknowledgements about change happening "from the bottom up," has resonated with a large audience, especially Millennials, who apparently are neither afraid of socialism nor married to it. Again, to no doubt oversimplify, Millennials appear to be rejecting the capitalism/socialism polarity as an either/or proposition. Whether this rejection leads to a new economic paradigm and what form that paradigm could possibly take is a whole other topic. In a sense, Sanders has tapped into the political process as an emotional journey without abandoning the need for the pragmatic, intellectual pursuit of knowledge stripped of *a priori* dogma. But mostly what the Bernie Sanders campaign has done is to connect people who were previously disconnected. Then again, so has Donald Trump.

The socially/politically disconnected populace is portrayed in a brief, understated sequence near the end of *The Wolf of Wall Street,* when FBI agent Denham (Kyle Chandler) is on the subway reading an account of the trial and sentencing of Jordan Belfort that he was instrumental in facilitating. He puts the tabloid down and looks at his fellow, passengers, many of whom are busy avoiding each other: one stands by the door waiting to exit, others are reading, sleeping, some converse, some stare into space—presumably thinking. The sequence ends with a shot of Denham, looking pensive, and like his cohorts, staring into space, thinking. It's a sequence of shots that demands that the viewer either interpret or ignore. My interpretation is that Denham is wondering what his time and effort in bringing a white-collar criminal to justice has accomplished for himself and his fellow travelers who eat, sleep and commute in the shadow of what they do.



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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

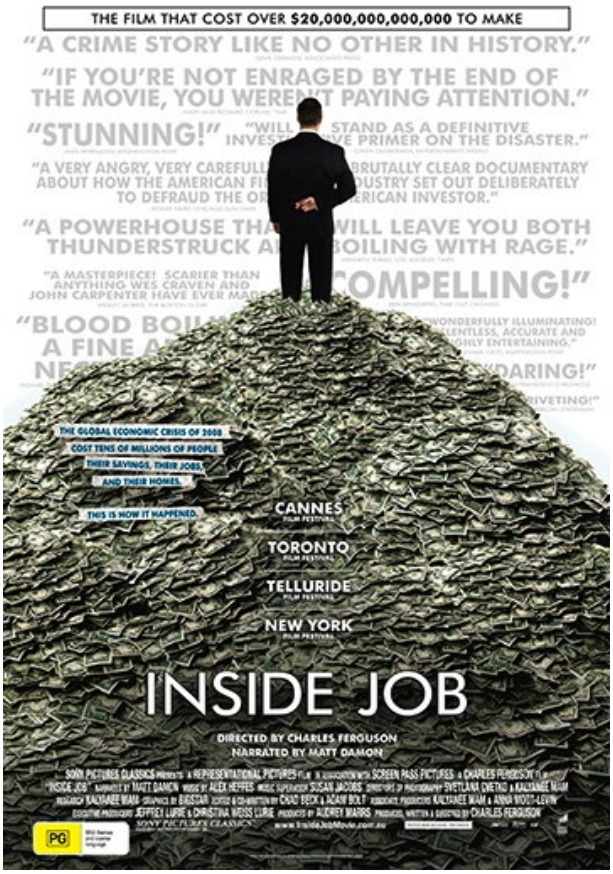
Visual essay:
Representing capitalism in popular movies

Films related to the Introduction:



Money isn't everything; entertainment value is. A look at movie receipts can be as instructive as it can be ethereal. As if to forecast the Bernie Sanders/Donald Trump polarity, Box Office Mojo's list of the top ten moneymaking political documentaries includes five Michael Moore docs and two by conservative commentator/convicted felon Dinesh D'Souza. Also in the top ten is a Ben Stein vehicle promoting 'intelligent design.' The relatively small gross receipts of the non-fiction film when compared with popular fiction films suggest that documentaries are preaching to an elite subset of adherent choirs that sing in vastly different denominations.

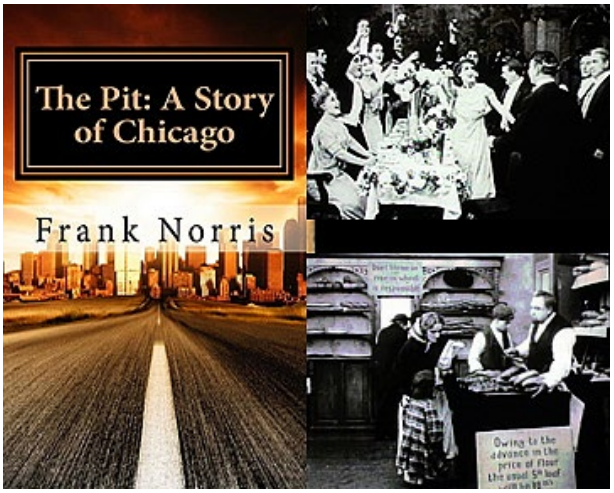
That's Entertainment. Box Office Mojo puts *Inside Job* at #10 of the top selling political docs, grossing $4.3 million (plus $3.5m in foreign receipts). Not bad for a documentary that cost about $2 million to make especially when compared to the 'art-house' film *Cosmopolis,* which cost $20 million to make and couldn't break $1 million in the U.S. in spite of the presence of heartthrob Robert Pattinson, whose five *Twilight* movies grossed a total of over $1.3 billion. Social issues may help to sell a movie but the audience, always in search of the emotional journey, demands to be entertained above all else.





Topical Issue of the Day. Movies that explore the function, value and impact of the capitalist economy through popular entertainment are not a post 2008, or for that matter a post 1929 phenomenon. In *Voice of the Violin* (Griffith, 1909) a German immigrant, who teaches the violin, joins a bomb-tossing anarchist group after being spurned by a student, the daughter of a wealthy family. The film was inspired by a number of violent actions that took place a year earlier in what was called the "anarchist outrages of 1908."

Art & Commerce. The clash between art and commerce is one of the primary themes in Frank Norris' 1903 novel *The Pit,* part exposé about wheat speculation and part romantic melodrama. In the wake of the Panic of 1907, D.W. Griffith credited the 200 plus page novel as source material for his 14-minute film adaptation (*A Corner in Wheat,* 1908), which focused on the impact speculation had on celebratory capitalists, struggling farmers and impoverished consumers.



In the Public Interest. Claude Rains and James Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Capra, 1939) explore the abuse of power, and the questionable relationship between the private and public sectors as it affects the public interest. The film was able to show how a political machine operates, how a filibuster works, and how a bill is passed without losing its audience by engaging the audience in the heroics of an 'everyman' who refused to be corrupted.





Our Most Socially Sanctioned Deadly Sin. Greed as a part of human nature is a familiar theme in popular culture. Also based on a Frank Norris' novel, *McTeague*, greed is abundantly evident in what's left of Stroheim's nine-hour 1924 silent movie, *Greed*. Fred Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart) wants all the gold in John Huston's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), which is spoofed in an episode from the Nickelodeon TV series *Rugrats* (1991- 1994). After finding a nickel that everybody fights over, Chucky declares "We don't need any stinking nickels," but the gang's day is ruined by their obsession for the possibility of finding more buried coins, and the failure to figure out how to divide a nickel five ways.

Films related to *Arbitrage*

All in the Family—Capitalism as a MacGuffin. "[T]he 2008 crash is just the background...The background may revolve around socially conscious behavior but at the end of the day, people need to be entertertained." — Oliver Stone on the film *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, *Forbes* 10/12/10.

***Wall Street* (Stone, 1987).** Greed is good when it's the MacGuffin that drives the family melodrama. Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen), an ambitious young stockbroker is unintentionally provided with inside information during a passing conversation with his father (Martin Sheen), a union leader at Bluestar, a struggling airline. Bud's ambition leads to his rise from a roach infested apartment



to a Manhattan penthouse, and then to his fall at the shame at having betrayed his father's confidence and his own deep-rooted working class values. His rise and fall hints at an awakening class-consciousness.



A blue-collar worker escorts the perp off the Wall Street premises, but not before Bud has atoned for the betrayal of his father. Bud will go to jail but dad tells him there's a job waiting for him at Bluestar where he can "create instead of living off the buying and selling of others."



Just Deserts. The bad guy gets exactly what he deserves. Bud betrays his villainous surrogate father, Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) who is financially screwed on the airline deal by a hated nemesis, and then is convicted for insider trading thanks to evidence provided by Bud.



Melodrama Never Sleeps. In Stone's sequel, *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (Stone, 2010), the plot convolutes as it thickens. Jake Moore (Shia LaBeouf) watches the financial market meltdown along with his dream of using his wealth to invest in a fusion project that he believes will provide an inexhaustible, sustainable source of energy.





Capital Infusion. Jake marries Winnie (Carey Mulligan), the estranged daughter of Gordon Gekko, then finds out that his father-in-law has left Winnie with a $100 million illegal Swiss account that he wants to use for the fusion project. Like Jimmy and Brooke in *Arbitrage,* he wants to do something good with the money. Through a series of plot machinations, one betrayal leads to another, Winnie

Let's Make a Deal. Gekko's Bloomberg computer terminal filled with financial data is replaced by a video sonogram of his prenatal grandson provided by Jake who wants to trade visiting rights for a return of the $100 million to Winnie.

becomes pregnant, the couple separates, and Gekko takes off with the money intended for his daughter.



More Just Deserts. Jake, Gekko and eventually Winnie plot against the cutthroat Bretton James (Josh Brolin), the capitalist scapegoat and pinata boy of the movie, who has caused so much ruin. In his final scene, at the recognition of his failure, James smashes a Goya painting of *Saturn Devouring His Son,* as if to admonish himself for a bad plan, or perhaps for not being ruthless enough.



Shiny happy people replete with party hats and balloons are featured in the saccharine-sweet end-credit sequence as they celebrate the first birthday of Winnie and Jake's son. In a sense, their son is metaphorically devoured when his dad treats the boy like a (blue) poker chip that he used to secure the $100 million he wanted. A version of social order is restored, and they all live happily ever after.



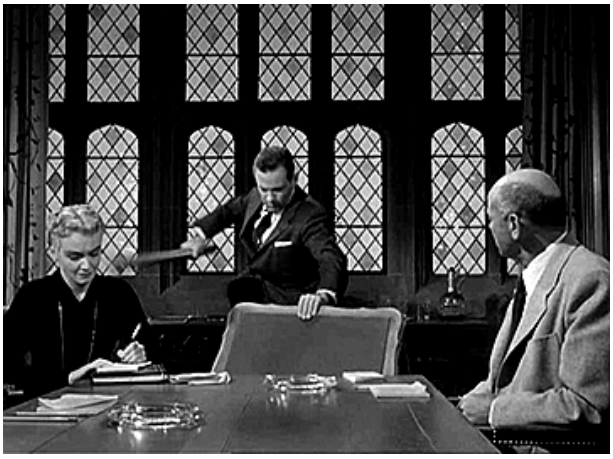
The Madoff family during happier times. Truth being stranger than fiction, the story of the real-life embezzler Bernie Madoff's family is closer to the realm of tragedy than melodrama, something ABC and HBO are eager to exploit with the 2016 release of two different projects:



ABC's *Madoff* with Richard Dreyfuss and Blythe Danner.



HBO's *The Wizard of Lies* with Michelle Pfeiffer and Robert De Niro.



Quality Control. From another era, two films are often cited as thoughtful ruminations on the corporate world that also successfully mix complex melodrama with an equally complex philosophical inquiry into the meaning of work in the modern world. William Holden in *Executive Suite* (Wise, 1954) battles for control of the board room while he laments the loss of pride in workmanship by angrily pulling apart a shoddy piece of merchandise the furniture company makes in order to “add a dime a year to the dividend.”

Rat Race. Gregory Peck as an upwardly mobile WWII vet with a dramatic and secretive history in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Johnson, 1956). At a job interview for a public relations position at a TV network, he’s told by his stressed-out, reclining interviewer (Arthur O’Connell), to spend one hour in an adjoining room writing an autobiography that must end with the sentence: The most significant thing about me is…



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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Films related to *Margin Call*

"[O]ne thing that happened to American finance during the bubble was that these guys [senior financial executives] got a combination of ego poisoning and testosterone poisoning and they became very disconnected from normal people and normal life….Most people in normal life, if they let that attitude get out of hand, are reminded by the world around them that they have to control themselves… The sense of impunity that these people have is critically important as a factor contributing to the crisis.
— Charles Ferguson, director of *Inside Job, Cineaste Magazine,* Winter 2010



PBS *Frontline* produced a dozen or so exhaustive documentaries that helped to unpack the densest issues regarding the Financial Crisis of 2008 by looking at that event from a variety of vantage points.



"The hedge fund king" and founder of SAC Capital, Steve A. Cohen, posing for 2002 holiday cards. In *To Catch a Trader, Frontline* reported on the SEC's charge that Cohen failed to supervise his employees and that his company demonstrated a complete failure of compliance. The Justice department considered the company a criminal enterprise where insider trading was rampant. Eight portfolio managers and traders were arrested; Cohen, whose net worth according to Forbes is $11.4 billion, was fined $1.8 billion and barred from managing money until 2018. I can hardly wait.



It's Alive! The Credit Default Swap as Frankenstein Monster. In part one of a four part series called *Money, Power and Wall Street*, *Frontline* identified the birth of the credit derivative known as the credit default swap (CDS) as taking place in Boca Raton, Florida, during a weekend conference in June 1994. JP Morgan bankers in their 20s assembled there to figure out how to make loans less risky for banks, thereby freeing up the need to hold on to capital and allowing the banks to make more loans. The CDS, which are private and unregulated, became a popular



Hoodwinked. Wanting to keep derivatives unregulated, financial institutions, led by Citigroup, lobbied hard to lift banking restrictions, prevent oversight, and repeal provisions of the Glass-Steagall Act that were preventing commercial and investment banks from merging. With the repeal, investment banks now had an entrée into the consumer mortgage market. Liberal Democrats like President Bill Clinton and NY Senator Chuck Schumer, who served on the Senate Committees on Finance and Banking, joined the ranks of conservative Republicans and

'financial instrument' that banks quickly found many unconventional and extremely profitable uses for.

played a key role in setting the banks free.



Brooksley Born vs. "The Committee to Save the World." Some regulators and members of Congress tried to raise a hue and cry about the threat of a crisis. In The Warning, *Frontline* tells the story of Brooksley Born who, in 1996 was appointed to head a small agency independent of the Federal Reserve that was charged with the responsibility of overseeing derivatives and financial fraud. At a luncheon meeting at the Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan told Born that he didn't think fraud rules were necessary because the market will always self-regulate itself.



Unintimidated by Greenspan's veiled threats, Born proceeded to publish a paper proposing rule changes regarding derivatives. Brought before Congress four times in 1998, upon questioning Born famously insisted that her agency was "trying to protect the money of the American public." For her efforts, Born was accused of orchestrating a power grab and with endangering the stability of a thriving market. Repeatedly attacked, marginalized and rendered powerless by the Fed and hostile Congressional committees, she resigned in 1999.



Raging Bull. In part four of *Money, Power and Wall Street*, laissez-faire American capitalism plunders its way through Europe and the United States. Armed with an arsenal of unregulated "derivative solutions," the banks are free to offer their trusting domestic and international clients a way to reduce the interest on their pre-existing debt, or fund needed infrastructure projects. The clients, municipalities, institutions and even sovereign states, collectively end up paying billions of dollars more on top of their original debt. In a zero sum game, the clients' loss is equal to the bankers gain.

I was a teenage quant. Out of the mouths of reformed bankers: *"I grew less happy with my work;" "You have the sneaking suspicion that you're not contributing to society;" "I never cared about money ;" "I felt it was beginning to change my own values;" "I just felt like I was doing something immoral;" "Everybody kind of knows in their heart that something's not right."* Potential mathematicians, engineers, and educators are lured into Wall Street's brain drain, the gilded have-a-heart-trap. Unwilling or legally unable to talk about the huge sums of money they made during their brief but profitable tenure at the investment banks they worked for, the reformed bankers do penance by working with the Occupy Wall Street movement or other organizations looking to challenge the dominance of their former masters.



There are numerous documentaries that use a variety of



techniques to succinctly do what the *Frontline* series takes a dozen or more hours to do. In addition to interviews with economists, psychologists, activists and so on, *The Flaw* (Sington, 2011) uses anecdotal stories from individuals, effective graphics and archival industrial films and animation that are both amusing and informative.





C-c-could we turn this off for a second? From *Inside Job,* an Under Secretary of the Treasury needs a moment from director Charles Ferguson's questions. The Bush administration official was one of a few interviewees that were annoyed at being asked substantive questions that they were not permitted to bullshit their way through. Paulson, Greenspan, Bernake, and Summers had the wisdom to decline participation.

"I ask you," says the 4-foot 11 inch former Secretary of Labor, "do I look like big government?" Robert Reich narrates and is the driving force behind *Inequality for All* (Kornbluth, 2013). Bill Clinton went out of his way to recruit, and then at some point proceeded to ignore him. "I became a true pain in the ass," says Reich. "I would sound off about inequality….I became predictable. People would role their eyes." Out of frustration he left the administration. The documentary focuses on how inequality undermines democracy by allowing the wealthy to control the political process.

Films related to *The Wolf of Wall Street*





Scorsese's Inferno. The spiritual subtext is apparent in the opening credit sequence to *Casino,* created by Elaine and Saul Bass. The mob connected DeNiro character is expelled from the inferno of his exploding car only to descend into an inferno of a different sort while one of the strains from Bach's St. Matthew Passion plays on the

Street Penance. In *Mean Streets* (1973) Charley (Harvey Keitel) contemplates eternal pain as the cost of a life of sin by holding his finger, first over the flame of a votive candle in church, and later over a match he lights in a local bar. Rejecting conventional penance offered by the traditional church as meaningless, Charlie takes it upon himself to do

soundtrack.

street penance for his sins by trying to help his wayward cousin, a hapless street thug.



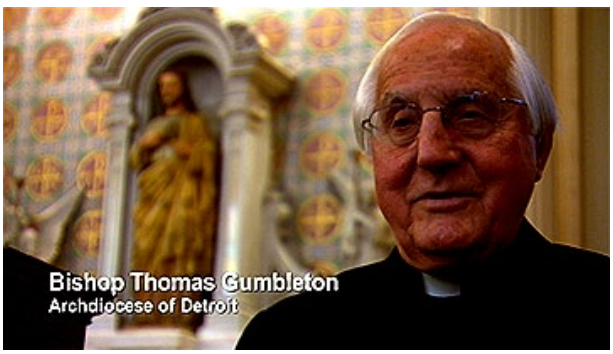
Take it off, take it all off. In a 1967 student film called *The Big Shave*, we see an early example of Scorsese's talent as well as his apparent interest in symbolically depicting the self-destructive nature of some learned notions of masculinity. The five minute film was sometimes interpreted as a metaphor for U.S. involvement in Viet Nam, but the bathroom location makes it feel more like an ode to Hitchcock while the jazz soundtrack and the act of shaving connects it to a popular Noxzema shaving cream commercial produced the same year.



The Sacred and Profane. Scorsese has spent a career humanizing the sacred (Jesus Christ, the Dali Lama, George Harrison) or searching for the redemptive qualities in the profane (Jake LaMotta, Henry Hill, Jordan Belfort), while avoiding passing judgment on either.



Doppelganger. In *The Departed* (2006), a remake of the



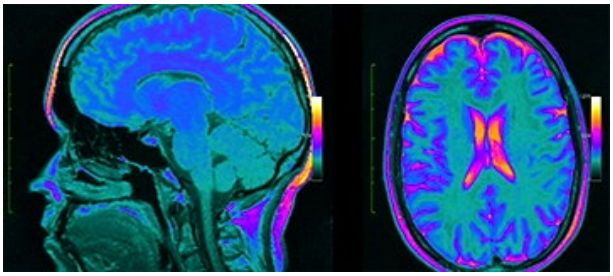
"Is Capitalism a Sin?" Michael Moore asks the question

Hong Kong movie *Infernal Affairs* (Lau and Mak, 2002), Scorsese muddies the water between sacred and profane by providing ambiguous signification over the good cop/bad cop duality, and what constitutes a mob rat and a police mole. In a key chase scene in which the similar looking Damon and DiCaprio characters are both wearing dark hoodies and baseball caps, the viewer may be easily confused about who's chasing whom. In the above scene, an off screen police officer, unsure about who's the good cop, lets both of the characters go. This yin yang game is played throughout the movie, as is the 'X' marks the spot (of murder) game played in the movie as an homage to the 1932 Howard Hawks version of *Scarface.*



The Propaganda Machine. (above) Calling capitalism a "radical evil," Father Peter Dougherty goes on to say, "I'm in awe of propaganda: the ability to convince people who are victimized, by the very system, to support the system and see it as a good." Moore's documentary alternates between lampooning capitalism and it's propaganda machine, and showing the human misery it causes. Like Scorsese, Moore considered a vocation in the priesthood, before turning to a career as a filmmaker, and his critique of capitalism is founded more in Catholic moral doctrine than Marxist theory.

to two Flint, Michigan priests and "their boss," the Bishop Gumbleton in his 2009 documentary, *Capitalism: A Love Story*. The clerics say yes, it's a sin, although it's unclear whether their answer is based on scripture, or their experiences as residents who have witnessed the hollowing out of their city by trade and other economic policies that have made an enemy of their labor union affiliated congregation.



Sex and Drugs and Money Roll. An MRI shown in Charles Ferguson's documentary, *Inside Job* (2010) demonstrates how neuroscientist have discovered that the part of the brain that is stimulated by the thrill of earning money and the rush from cocaine, are the same. Many of the documentaries about the Crisis including Danny Schechter's *Plunder: The Crime of Our Time* (2009) and Alex Gibney's *Client 9: The Rise and Fall of Eliot Spitzer,* address the testosterone link between sex, drugs, power and money-making.



In The Wolf of Wall Street, Jordan and Naomi are aware of the link without the benefit of an MRI.



[above] A New York State of Mind. As governor of New



York, [home of one of the most corrupt states in the U.S.](), Spitzer proceeded to make enemies of a different sort as he challenged the dominance of entrenched politicians that had a seemingly unyielding sense of entitlement. After Spitzer resigned in the wake of a sex scandal, three of the officials pictured above (Joe Bruno, Malcolm Smith, and Sheldon Silver) were expelled from office after they were convicted on federal fraud and bribery charges. Spitzer was never charged with anything other than a nasty case of hubris.

[left] The Pissing Contest. The argument behind *Client 9* is that New York State Governor Eliot Spitzer's (top) fall from grace had more to do with his aggressive prosecution of white-collar criminals on Wall Street while he was the State Attorney General, than his sexual escapades with *The Emperors Club* prostitute that he frequented. During his investigation, Spitzer angered two very powerful people who felt more persecuted than prosecuted: Hank Greenberg of AIG (center), and Ken Langone, co-founder of The Home Depot. They were unforgiving.

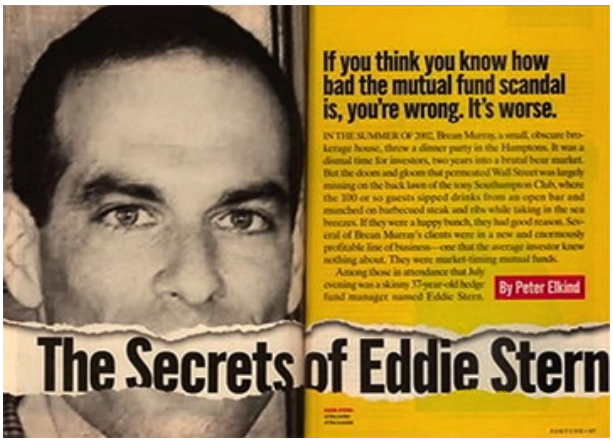




Annotated Art. "The word that shows up on my paintings more than any other word is greed," says artist Geoffrey Raymond, who appeared in Danny Schechter's film, *Plunder.* Conservative critics of *Wolf of Wall Street* accuse the film as being unfairly skewed. [One critic for example](), accused the film of making "Belfort emblematic of Wall Street's greed" when "he was nothing more than a thief who found a way to steal from anyone who trusted him and to blame it on the stock market." The comment belies the environment created by decades of deregulating capitalism, which allowed a broad scope of criminality to flourish unpunished, of which the "annotators" of Raymond's work seem to be well aware.

Raymond set up shop on Wall Street, where passersby from all stripes of life used pens to add unmediated "annotations" to his paintings. On the left, *The Annotated Fed* (Ben Bernake) and *The Screaming Pope* (Hank Paulson).

The Canary in the Coal Mine. How many examples of criminality must be provided to Wall Street apologists before they stop saying Bernie Madoff, Raj Rajaratnan, Jordan Belfort or Eddie Stern are isolated thieves who found a way to game the system? In *Client 9* we learn how Stern's hedge fund, Canary Capital Partners, with the help of Bank of America, engaged in "late trading," which is analogized in the documentary as being allowed to bet on a horse race after the race is over and you know who won. Stern made a plea deal after providing dozens of names to Spitzer, and fraud charges were dropped. You can read the lengthy 2004 *Fortune* article here, or a summary here.





Namesake. Charles Ponzi, the patron saint of white-collar criminals, was born Carlo Pietro Giovanni Guglielmo Tebaldo Ponzi and also went by the name Ponci and Bianchi. You can never have too many names when you are robbing Peter to pay Paul.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Films relatled to *Killing Them Softly*

Genre Movies, the Great Depression and Beyond. “Capitalism, call it what you like, give to each and every one of us a great opportunity if only we seize it with both hands and make the most of it."
—Al Capone in an interview with Claud Cockburn





Melodramas like *Wild Boys of the Road* (Wellman, 1933) and *Our Daily Bread* (Vidor, 1934) provided popular acknowledgement of the hardships experienced by people during the Great Depression. King Vidor had to self-finance his movie and with the help of Charlie Chaplin got the assurance from United Artists to distribute the film, which features notions like labor cooperatives that were too scary for the studios to support.

Musicals like *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Berkeley and LeRoy, 1933), and *42nd Street* (Bacon, 1933) acknowledged hardship while adding an ironic layer of denial, or maybe an affirmation of hope, via the escapist fantasy offered through the presentation of extravagant musical sequences.



But it was the gangster genre—some 70 movies made between 1930 and 1933 according to Mark Cousins’ *Story of* Film—that exposed the possibility, danger, excitement, and attraction of a subversive economy. Film analysis of the parallels between capitalism and the gangster genre as the ruthless side of the American Dream, especially by the left, are well-traveled, but thanks to the genre’s ability to morph with the times, remains relevant.



In *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse* (Litvak, 1938), Edward G. Robinson plays a wealthy society doctor researching criminal behavior. He joins a gang of thieves in order to measure their, and his own, responses to the burglaries they commit. It's not one of the most memorable movies of the gangster genre, but the following exchange between Clitterhouse and Jo Keller (Claire Trevor) is a good summation of why the exploited poor might choice the expressway to crime over the slow route to political action.





Jo is in the business of fencing the furs, jewels or whatever else that is brought to her, while Dr. Clitterhouse, working under the pseudonym "the professor," is trying to understand **the business model:**

> **JO:** When it comes to distribution don't ever worry. I get paid cash on delivery and I'm ready to pay out as soon as the job is done.
> **PROFESSOR:** What if something should happen? If we should get caught and fail to deliver the stuff to you?
> **JO:** Then I get another gang started on another warehouse. ...
> **PROFESSOR:** I see. No sentiment, just the routine.
> **JO:** Like any other business.
> **PROFESSOR:** But tell me, don't you ever feel any pangs of conscience? I mean that what you're doing is wrong and opposed to the best interest of society?



JO: Wrong? Suppose you tell me something. Would you ask that same question of a stock promoter who robs widows and orphans? Or one of them society mugs who owns a lot of firetrap tenement houses where the rats and bugs eat you alive? The kind of place I was born in. No, the way I look at it professor, me, you, the all of us here are more on the level than those guys.

Let them eat bread! The image of the Cuba cake in *Godfather II* (Copola, 1974) is so iconic, it's almost a cliché, but it's an image that communicates so much, so quickly. The mafia, U.S. business, and the Batista government all got a piece of cake; the people of course had to eat bread, which no doubt was stale and moldy. The gangster genre's status as a parallel or alternate universe to the sanctioned economy, makes it particularly adept at advancing political and social commentary *du jour*. *Killing Them Softly's* poke at the 2008 Crisis being a case in point.



Films related to *Cosmopolis*

Waiting for the End of the World:
"It's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."
—attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Zizek





Manufacturing Dissent: Situated in the near future, Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* is at the edge of science fiction, a genre not foreign to David Cronenberg. Mixing art and artifice, the Times Square riot sequence was created in a green screen studio in Toronto, and a British-born heartthrob plays a Bronx-born asset manager. In the lower left corner of the picture, the centerpiece of the scene and the movie, the white limo, is barely visible under the rig of lights and other gear.

Recurring Nightmares. Limited resources, class warfare, authoritarian control, environment disasters, perpetual war, and gross inequity of all types are at the surface of the current spate of sci-fi, horror and dystopian movies- and there are a lot of them. Of course many of the same themes will be found in films from earlier cycles, Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis,* for example. In *Elysium* (Blomkamp, 2013) the Alice Braga character is trying to get her daughter medial care that is being hoarded by the

privileged class who live in an off-planet paradise far from the terrestrial misery. Surface themes may be in the viewer's face but they do not always clearly indicate the underlying message.



That's All Folks: Searching for the underlying message, a 2015 issue of the now defunct print version of CineAction puts good use to the Jameson/Zizek quote above. Focusing on end-of-world scenarios, the issue features articles that categorize the stories as apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic or dystopian. It analyzes them in terms of whether a causal connection is made between capitalism and the calamity at hand (environmental devastation, alien invasion, authoritarian oppression, etc.). Some of the magazine articles apply a neo-Marxist framework to help determine the underlying ideological message of the films by posing the following questions:

- Do the films identify (name) the system (capitalism) as the problem—or at all?
- Is there a suggestion that there is no alternative to capitalism?
- Does the movie's presentation of a parallel reality that is much worse than our current reality encourage viewer nostalgia for and valorization of our present day reality?





Punch the Clock: This newborn baby was genetically engineered to live in the wrong zip code and enjoy 25 years of normal aging before the clock begins to countdown. At 25 she must earn her keep or she will be dead in one year. Some have all the time (money) in the world; others get by moment to moment (paycheck to paycheck).

Andrew Niccol's 2011 movie *In Time* may substitute time for money, but social stratification is alive and well and capitalism is still depicted as a zero-sum game: "For a few to be immortal, many must die," says a member of the 1%, a centenarian trapped in the body of a 25 year old.

Time Bandits: Sylvia (Amanda Seyfried) and Will (Justin Timberlake) rob banks because that's where the time is. Sylvia is part of the ruling class and Will worked in a factory until a wealthy, suicidal centenarian gifted him a hundred years. Part Robin Hood, part Bonnie and Clyde and part Patty Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army, the couple chooses a life of crime in order to set the masses free. Does the movie inspire activism or at least promote class-consciousness? Or, as one writer in CineAction suggested, does the movie's romantic pairing of lovers from opposite sides of the income bracket forgive class exploitation? Who knows what evil lurks in the hearts of filmmakers?

Insurgent Media: With sales of newly released video



games overtaking sales of newly released movies by a wide margin, it's no wonder that the former has had a discernable influence on the later. To the left is an image from *The Call of Duty* franchise, a top selling game in the most popular genre categories: the action and first person shooter genres.





The Military-Entertainment Complex: Both the video game and the movie, *Battle: Los Angeles* (Liebesman, 2011) were released on the same day. Looking more like he's in Iraq than Los Angeles, Specks (Ne-Yo) checks the pulse of a fallen soldier. Fed in part by the popularity of single shooter games that glorify war and military power, there are currently more military-themed movies available than you can point an M16 at. Along with the fear of terrorism, the militarization of entertainment may also be having the effect of acclimating the public to an uneasy acceptance of the militarization of urban police departments, the proliferation of military drones that allow soldiers to fight remote battles, and a threat to personal privacy for the sake of perceived security.

Practice Makes Perfect: *Edge of Tomorrow* (Liman, 2014) is modeled after game-playing behavior. As when playing a video game, the first person character, in this case Bill Cage (Tom Cruise), 'dies' numerous times while trying to achieve his goal: preventing aliens from colonizing the planet. Each time he 'reboots' he learns from his errors and gets a little further into the game (the story). This is repeated until he reaches whatever level is necessary to defeat the invading aliens and to bring us to the end credits. In the process Cage evolves from a spineless PR officer for the military into a relentless fighting man worthy of being played by the equally relentless Cruise who migrates from one mega budget movie to another.



Game Theory: Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999) also models game-playing behavior, but Cronenberg is more interested in the role of technology and how the user engages with the otherworldly content of the game, over the motor skill operations necessary to achieve a certain goal. An umbilical-like cable connects the fleshy game controller directly into a port that has been surgically inserted into the player's spine. The movie is an ontological detective story where there is constant confusion over whether we are 'in' or 'outside' the game; whether the game is controlling the user or vice versa; over who is a real person and who is an avatar put there to move the game forward; and about what the actual goal of the game is. Amidst the confusion, Allegra (Jennifer Jason Leigh), the game's celebrated designer and her inexperienced security guard Ted (Jude Law) are on the run from the violent "realist underground" who object to how gaming perverts reality.





Discipline and Punish: In the film *Gamer* a 17 year-old rich boy (Logan Lerman) controls the body of a death row prisoner (Gerard Butler) in a first person shooter game called *Slayer* while a homebound obese man controls the body of the inmate's wife (Amber Valletta) in a Sims type life simulation game called *Society*. Unlike the east and west, the two shall meet, resulting in a satisfying if predictable outcome. The controversial *Slayer* game funds the prison system "with the full cooperation and approval of the United States Federal Government," says the evil genius CEO of the game development company...

... Hyper frenetic from start to finish, *Gamer* (Neveldine & Taylor, 2009) is exhausting to watch as the filmmakers tell a traditional gladiator story through an acrobatic use of cinematic sleight of hand. By the end of the movie the husband and wife reunite with their daughter, the evil CEO is dead, and everybody can get back to playing their favorite game.



Estranged Labor: In Ari Folman's trippy *The Congress* (2013), the actor Robin Wright, playing a fictional version of herself, loses control of her image after allowing a Hollywood studio to digitally scan her body. She receives a boatload of money in return for allowing the studio the right to use her computer-generated image. Twenty years later, driving into the "animation zone" to renew her contract, Robin enters a world in which people snort nifty glass ampoules in order to inhabit the being of others. And then the story gets complicated.



Sentient Commodities: Some of the recent movies that feature artificial intelligence—*Robo Cop, Ex Machina, Chappie, Automata* [not pictured]—are concerned first with what it means to be a sentient being, second in what the robots were originally manufactured to do, and then in how the A.I. reflects and/or rejects the masters (imperious corporations, mad scientists, boy geniuses) who built them.



The (open-ended) End: Warring political factions, underground rebels, and especially a synthesis of opposites leading to a transformation that is either horrific or transcendent, are recurring allegorical themes in many of Cronenberg's movies, which all suggest an open-ended, undefined transformative synthesis. Examples include not only the relationship between Eric Packer and his assassin in *Cosmopolis* but the following:

- top left to right, the evil yuppie Daryl Revok (Michael Ironside) defeated when his body is inhabited by his rebel brother at the end of *Scanners* (1981);
- in *Videodrome* (1983) the James Woods character defeating a right wing conspiracy by destroying the old flesh to make way for the new flesh;
- bottom left to right, gender ambiguity/synthesis in *M Butterfly* (1993), and
- the enmeshed personalities of the twin brothers in *Dead Ringers* (1988) (Jeremy Irons).

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Films related to *Too Big to Fail* and *The Big Short*



"The only real choice at the next general election is between Conservative policies and soft socialist policies. And the only way to be sure of getting Conservative policies is to vote Conservative. To coin a phrase, 'There Is No Alternative.'"
—Margaret Thatcher, *Daily Telegraph*, April 1, 1997

Michael Moore's *Capitalism: a Love Story* contain stories in the main movie and in the "extras" on the Blu-ray that challenge Margaret Thatcher's famous TINA slogan by offering alternative solutions to the seemingly monolithic problems presented by global capitalism.





It's a Wonderful Bank –The Bank of North Dakota was founded in 1919 to save its farming community from serial gouging by predatory lenders. As if reenacting a scene from a Frank Capra movie, the bank declared a moratorium on debt during the Great Depression. Farmers were able to keep their homes and property and the bank was paid back in the 1940's as the economy improved. More recently, financially capitalized with $4 billion, the bank was able to fund $500 million in state programs without taxing its citizens, and was virtually unaffected by the 2008 meltdown because they did not 'invest' in derivatives or buy subprime home loans.

"That's Cooperation" sing the Sesame Street birds of a different feather **–** Children learn early what adults forget quickly. An engineering company, and taxi service in Wisconsin, and a California bakery are three examples of worker cooperatives featured in Moore's film. The workers in these democratically run companies are owners with equal shares in the companies. Salaries are dependent on job responsibilities but the pay ratios are more logical than to 200 to 300 times more CEOs currently make over their workers in many corporations. A factory worker at the Alvarado Street Bakery earns about $65,000 annually.



An Uber-difference –Unlike the app-driven Uber business model, the Union Cab drivers of Wisconsin own a share of the business and also have a say in how the company is run. Seniority pay increases incentivize drivers to hang around. “Twenty-one years in ”says one driver, “I’m making 50% commission. That’s unheard of in this industry.” Uber drivers may make up to 80% commission but are considered independent contractors who in addition to paying personal taxes, own 100% liability (fuel, depreciation, repairs, insurance) on their cars and have no support system, like the mechanics of Union Cab who are also owners. In addition, Uber drivers are also responsible for paying sales tax on their rides and can look forward to one day being replaced by robots. It’s no wonder that some think the multi-billion dollar company is a huge global scam that is paying drivers two dollars an hour in real terms.

While not exactly part of a political or economic philosophy, there have been a number of recent news stories about owners looking at income inequality and ways to share the wealth that their employees help to create.

Fermenting Generosity – Turkish immigrant, Hamdi Ulukay, the owner of Chobani Yogurt, gifted shares of the company to 2,000 full time employees. Chobani was started in New York State in 2005 and is said to be valued in the billions of dollars. Employee payouts are based on seniority and range from $150,000 to over $1 million. The gift may also have had something to do with a dispute between Ulukay and TPG Capital, a private equity firm that provided a loan to Chobani.





Second Family – “I don’t think there’s anybody worthy to run this company but the people who built it,” said Bob Moore, who started an Oregon-based family run business in 1978 called *Bob’s Red Mill Natural Foods.* Rejecting buyout offers, Moore used an Employee Stock Ownership Plan to transfer ownership of his company to its 209 employees, some of whom have been with him for thirty years.



The Price is Right – When Dan Price decided to raise the minimum wage for his 120 employees to $70,000 annually, he caused a storm of controversy within and beyond his Seattle-based credit card processing company, Gravity Payments. You can read the intricate economic domino effect the company policy had in this *Inc. Magazine* article.

Windows and Doors – When you can’t depend on the generosity of your boss, there’s always direct action.

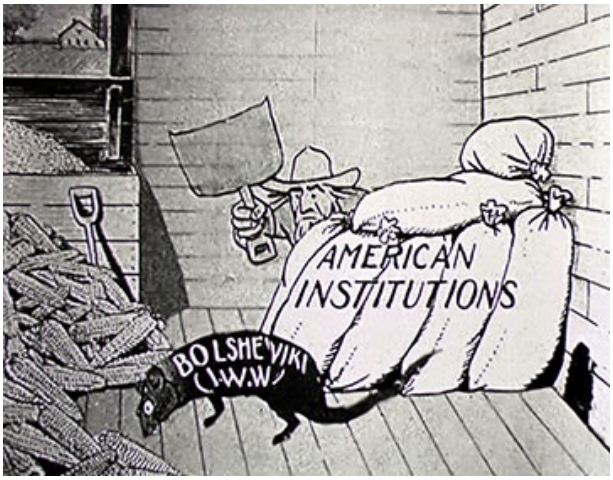
Around Christmas 2008 Republic Windows and Doors declared bankruptcy and, in violation of the WARN Act, told their employees that their health insurance was immediately terminated, and they would not receive the severance, sick, or vacation pay that they were due. After a six-day sit-down strike, the company's creditor, Bank of America, having recently received $20 billion in TARP money, were embarrassed by bad press and a groundswell of community and national support into agreeing with all of the workers demands.



Films related to the Conclusion

A History of Fear and Loathing

> "Communism is no longer a creeping threat to America. It is a racing doom that comes closer to our shore each day." — Joseph McCarthy, June 2, 1950





Uncle Sam and the Bolesheviki (c., 1919) - The Ford Motor Company was the first major corporation to establish a film department. In addition to the production of a variety of civic-minded films with a charitable aim in mind, the film department also produced anti-union propaganda films like this 40-second animation made at the height of the first Red Scare. The animation is included in a collection of movies released by the National Film Preservation Foundation, called *Social Issues in American Film, 1900-1934*.

Political Prisoner for President - In 1920, the last of Eugene Debs' five bids for the president of the U.S. was run from a prison cell where the socialist candidate received about a million write-in votes. Debs served 20 months of a 10-year sentence for making a public speech in opposition to World War I. Charged with sedition in violation of the Espionage Act of 1917, his sentence began 5 months after the war ended.

Guilt by Association - In a scene from *Modern Times* (1936), Charlie Chaplin succinctly and humorously shows how the 'marketplace of ideas' can be a dangerous place to even window shop if the ideas expressed represent a threat to the status quo. Charlie tries to return the, presumably, red flag that has fallen off the back of a lumber truck just as a group of protesting workers turn a

corner. With *The Internationale* playing on the soundtrack, Charlie, the innocent bystander, is taken for their leader and carted off to jail by the police.





Back in the USSR – Awkward and artificial, you can always sniff out blatant propaganda by its failure to even remotely hide its ulterior motive. *Mission to Moscow* (Curtiz, 1943) *The North Star* (Milestone, 1943), and *Song of Russia* (Benedek & Ratoff, 1944) are pro-Soviet films made in the U.S.A. when the U.S. was depending on "Uncle Joe" Stalin to defeat the Nazis. The first 30 minutes of *The North Star* - part musical, part war movie – is a particularly bizarre spectacle. Written by Lillian Hellman, the movie features an all-star cast of American actors speaking the way they imagine happy Russian peasants speak. Singing jubilant songs with music & lyrics written by Aaron Copland & Ira Gershwin, *Three Penny Opera*, it's not. The idyllic musical presentation of a Ukraine village at the beginning of the movie is there to make the upcoming Nazi atrocities all the more horrific.

"Can you hear me now?" asked Ayn Rand [left], after moving closer to the microphones. The Soviet émigré, author and objectivist philosopher was called to testify as an expert witness on Soviet propaganda before the House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). HUAC scrutinized the three films above for evidence of communist infiltration into Hollywood productions. Robert Taylor who played the male lead in *Song of Russia,* identified Howard Da Silva as someone who "always had something to say at the wrong time," and suggested that he, Taylor, was coerced into making the movie. Later backing away from that assertion, he admitted that no one can "force you to make any picture."







The Reds Under the Bed (the second Red Scare) – When World War II ended, so did the love fest with the Soviet Union and a new Cold War sub-genre was born that shared stylistic and thematic similarities with film noir. Movies like *I Married a Communist* [aka *The Woman on Pier 13*](Stevenson, 1949), *I Was a Communist for the FBI* (Douglas, 1951) and *My Son John* (McCarey, 1952) are as nasty as the pro-Soviet films are sugar sweet. Each of these films has an interesting backstory and was instrumental in creating a pervasive atmosphere of fear and mistrust on film sets, in movie theaters and eventually in much of mainstream America.

Communism as a MacGuffin – One instructive backstory involves the making of *The Whip Hand* (Menzies, 1951). Upon completion of the movie, Howard Hughes, the owner of RKO at the time and as virulent an anticommunist as he was an obsessive-compulsive germophobe, demanded that sections of the film be reshot to replace a story involving a Nazi conspiracy with that of a story involving a communist conspiracy. Both *The Whip Hand* and *I Married a Communist,* also made by Hughes, did poorly at the box office as did many of RKO's movies under his supervision. Hughes eventually sold the company that he purchased in 1948 to General Tire and Rubber Company in 1955.



I Am Spartacus! - In this famous, often satirized scene from *Spartacus* (Kubrick, 1960), Roman slaves all claim to be Spartacus thereby protecting the real Spartacus by refusing to identify him (name names). Based on a novel by the blacklisted writer Howard Fast, with a screenplay by Dalton Trumbo, also blacklisted, the release of the film marked the unofficial end of McCarthyism but not the Cold War. Trumbo, one of the Hollywood Ten, had been using a variety of pseudonyms and fronts since 1950. His actual name re-appeared in the credits of *Spartacus* and *Exodus* (Preminger) also released in 1960.



Conspiracy Theories – Sen. Joseph McCarthy [left] was famous for waving a piece of paper that claimed to contain the names of over 200 State Department employees that were known communists. By the early 1960s the wreckage wrought by McCarthyism was explored if not exploited in popular entertainment. A notably example being the Cold War thriller, *The Manchurian Candidate* (Frankenheimer, 1962) in which James Gregory [right] plays a U.S. Senator who also waves a paper claiming the same. In the movie however, the Gregory character is part of the conspiracy he is pretending to uncover.

Reunion – By the 1970s, Cold War thrillers morphed from paranoid fantasies into reflections on the personal trauma caused by McCarthyism. In Martin Ritt's 1976 comedy-drama *The Front,* Woody Allen plays a restaurant cashier and bookie who 'fronts' a number of blacklisted writers for

fame, fortune, love, and eventually on principle. The movie features the participation of many formerly blacklisted artists including director Ritt, actors Zero Mostel [right, sitting next to Allen], Herschel Bernardi, and Lloyd Gough, as well as the film's writer, 96-year-old Brooklyn-born Walter Bernstein, writer of dozens of popular movies and TV shows.





"I'm a Communist," says the Martin Scorsese character unapologetically. In *Guilty by Suspicion* (Winkler, 1991), Scorsese plays a 1950s director who is dodging a subpoena and has his bags packed and ready to leave the country never to return. Explaining "it's not my country anymore," his exit is suggestive of the flight Weimar Republic filmmakers took in 1933.

In retrospect, Scorsese's role as a politically persecuted filmmaker in *Guilty by Suspicion* has an ironic twist to it ...



... given the flak he later received because of his support for director Elia Kazan, who named names when called before HUAC. Scorsese presented Kazan with a Lifetime Achievement Academy Award in 1999 to a clearly divided audience. He also co-wrote and co-directed a documentary about Kazan for PBS's *American Masters* series.

In addition, Scorsese also received criticism for *The Aviator* (2008) that was perceived by some as a "mendacious film" that "glorifies the odious Howard Hughes." But as I've suggested elsewhere, Scorsese is more interested in the interior life of the sinner then he is in the sins.





Moviola – The Scorsese character's name in *Guilty by Suspicion* is Joe Lesser, but the image on the Moviola that he and the De Niro character watch is from the opening scene of the Joseph Losey movie *The Boy with*

The Other – Written by (surprise!) two blacklisted writers and directed by Losey, Pat O'Brien and Dean Stockwell, *the boy with the green hair,* must grapple with the implications of being different.

the Green Hair (1948). Howard Hughes asked Losey if he'd like to direct I Married a Communist. Losey declined. The Hughes offer turned out to be a litmus test that Losey failed. Between HUAC and Hughes, Losey, like Lesser, decided that leaving the country was his best option.





Art and Life – Popular entertainment continues to mine the second Red Scare for its inherent drama as well as its ability to raise cautionary tales about groupthink that springs from fear and loathing, as in the films *Good Night, and Good Luck* (Clooney, 2005), and more recently *Trumbo* (Roach, 2015) staring Bryan Cranston [inset] as convict #85297.

The Other Other – Green hair, skin color, religion, gender, age - we'll never run out of identifying those things, big and small, that define us by our differences. To paraphrase Joseph McCarthy, there will always be a creeping threat or a racing doom inching to our shores. And you can be sure that there will always be someone there to flex a muscle and remind us of the threat, with slogans and the promise of borders, walls and violence.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Post-Ferguson Hollywood

by Jeff Menne



"I'm here at the Academy Awards," Chris Rock said in his introduction, "Otherwise known as the White People's Choice Awards."



In *99 Homes*, Dennis Nash's home is in foreclosure.



In *The Big Short*, hedge fund managers bet against the housing market.

Following his relative success in the 2016 Iowa caucus, Senator Marco Rubio was asked in a CNN interview if he thought the year's Oscars were too white. "I don't know," he said, "What does that mean?" Noncommittal on this issue, he wheeled to the "bigger problems" with Hollywood. He said:

> "I think the bigger problem with Hollywood, is the values they are trying to ram down our kids' throats and how hard it's made it on parents."[1] [open endnotes in new window]

One might expect him to turn a liberal talking point into a conservative one. Less expectedly, though, he said he still wants to see *Straight Outta Compton* (Gray, Universal, 2015), the biopic narrating N.W.A.'s rise to fame in the late 1980s. Rubio has been an outspoken fan. Near the release date, he tweeted that "Team Rubio" would need to "clear two hours on my schedule on Aug. 14. Gotta see #StraightOuttaCompton." It seems that Rubio gives *Straight Outta Compton* a pass, making it somehow innocent of Hollywood "values."

I'm less interested in guessing what counts for Rubio as Hollywood values, here, than in suggesting what value "blackness" is given in *Straight Outta Compton* and more generally in Hollywood's "Post-Ferguson Cinema." My analysis rests on Michael Rogin's famous claim that turning points in Hollywood history have been eased by the "surplus symbolic value of blacks, the power to make African Americans represent something beside themselves."[2] The problem with the nominations for the 88th Academy Awards was not simply their failure to honor black labor within the industry. The problem, rather, is that this labor is overlooked while the "symbolic value" of black lives outside the industry is ceaselessly harvested by Hollywood.[3]

Take, for instance, a most conspicuous example: in his effort to revitalize the *Star Wars* franchise, J.J. Abrams cast a black actor, John Boyega, as a turncoat storm trooper, hence recalibrating the geopolitics such that the franchise can satisfy its core audience but reach beyond them too. The franchise, thanks to Abrams, is once again open for business. Relating business and blackness, in fact, has delimited a set of themes that gives recent Hollywood cinema a kind of period integrity. Calling it "Post-Ferguson Hollywood" lets me foreshorten and place in a single framework the concerns begotten by the financial crisis but later aggravated by the policing crisis. Two strains of cinema—one concerning finance capital, say *99 Homes* (Bahrani, Broad Green Pictures, 2015) and *The Big Short* (McKay, Paramount, 2015), another concerning blackness, say *Dope* (Famuyiwa, Open Road, 2015) and *Creed* (Coogler, MGM/ Warner Bros., 2015)—seem to have been braided into the commercial logic of franchise moviemaking.

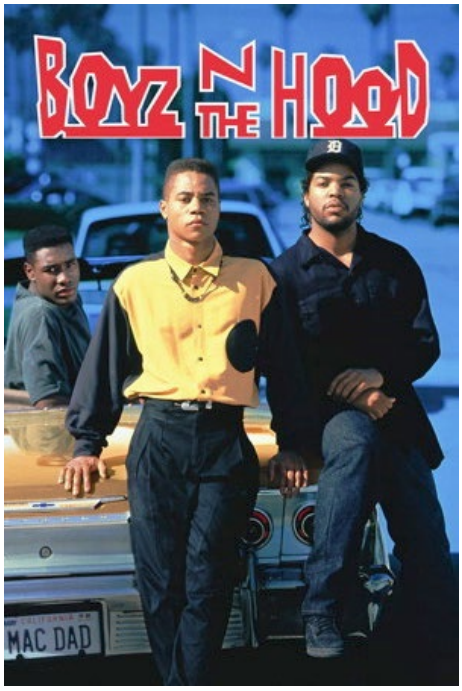


At issue in *Dope* is Malcolm Adekanbi's authenticity as a black teenager.



In *Creed*, Rocky, once the "Great White Hope" of Philadelphia, now trains the son of the black fighter, Apollo, who was once his rival.

Oddly, what might best illuminate this commercial logic is the unlikely and largely contrived "beef" between Martin Shkreli and Ghostface Killah. Shkreli, known as the "Pharma Bro" after coldheartedly raising the price of HIV medication nearly 6,000 percent, was unveiled as the winner of an auction for the Wu-Tang Clan's one-of-a-kind album, *Once Upon a Time in Shaolin*; he paid $2 million to be its sole owner.[4] While the Wu-Tang have been known for stunts of this kind—their innovation of the business model was their calling card from the first—in this instance group member Ghostface felt it had backfired.[5] He insulted Shkreli and walked into a "beef" that Shkreli had been trying to stage with a hip-hop star. The theater of it is mostly insignificant, except for the fact that theater is needed.



Ice Cube in his first movie, *Boyz n the Hood*.



Ice Cube in the hit comedy *Friday*.

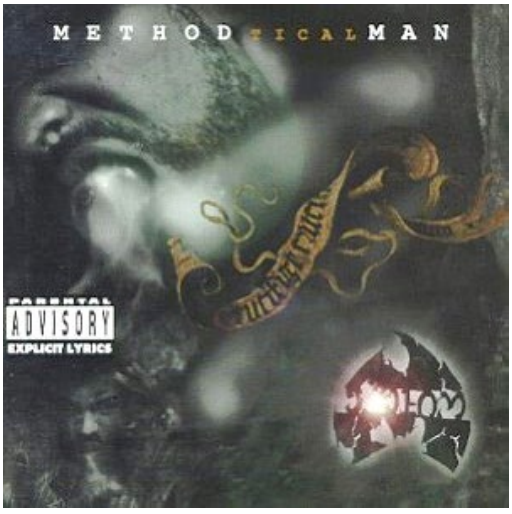
Entrepreneurial capitalism, for Shkreli, needs theatricalizing in order to claim its legitimacy.[6] Shkreli's insight, it seems, is that hip hop has been a discursive field for capitalism in this mode; this dates back at least to N.W.A., the Compton hip-hop act that popularized the style known as "gangsta rap." A founding member, Eazy-E had been a neighborhood drug-dealer who wished to turn his capital from bad to good. When he and Dr. Dre recorded the single "Boyz-n-the-Hood," they transformed illegitimate drug earnings into legitimate record sales: it's the perfect updating of robber-baron capitalism. But what *Straight Outta Compton* dramatizes is that Eazy-E's fatal flaw was to put his trust in an old-fashioned manager still committed to finding the "solo act" within the group. In the process Eazy failed to put the ensemble membership of N.W.A. under contract and was



F. Gary Gray, director of both *Friday* and *Straight Outta Compton*.



The first Wu-Tang album, from which many solo albums sprang.



Method Man's first album after the Wu-Tang debut.

hence unable to produce a franchise for its earnings. Ice Cube was the most important writer in N.W.A. but was unrecognized within its business model—so he got away, discovering in his flight that he could spin a media franchise from his music. First *Boyz n the Hood* (Singleton, Columbia, 1991), then *Friday* (Gray, New Line, 1995). F. Gary Gray directed both *Friday* and *Straight Outta Compton*, and Ice Cube's company, Cube Vision, produced both movies; it's easy to see the latter movie, in turn, as a sly celebration of Ice Cube's business farsightedness.

What Eazy-E failed to do, however, the Wu-Tang Clang was able to do in an epochal way. Having the leverage of their successful single "Protect Ya Neck," Wu-Tang leader RZA shopped their first album *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* until he negotiated a contract for the band that did not place its individual members under contract but instead left them free to sign individually on the strength of the album. The album was huge, and each individual album to follow—Method Man's *Tical*, Raekwon's *Only Built 4 Cuban Linx*, and GZA's *Liquid Swords*—was negotiated more dearly in turn. In effect, RZA made a franchise.

Here's where it gets weird. In making the franchise, the Wu-Tang routed their "powers" through the world of comic-book heroes. Ghostface, for instance, took Tony Stark (aka Iron Man) as one of his aliases. The reason he did, I'd argue, is that the comics have a dehistoricizing pull in them; they replace the moral complications of lived history with the moral neatness of heroes and villains. The Marvel Universe can thus reframe geopolitical debates (military action and international law, the United Nations, etc.) in terms of unmistakable choices between good and evil.

What the Wu-Tang Clan did for hip hop, then, is import the good-evil schema of the comics into its world, making of the comics a philosopher's stone able to transform inner-city struggle into a mass-market object of consumption. The hip-hop artist was in turn less political and more archetypal. And the great trope of the comics—the oscillation between illegitimacy and legitimacy—became its own (i.e. Batman is a vigilante in the illegitimate nighttime world but a millionaire in the legitimate daytime world just as Jay-Z was a drug dealer in the illegitimate streets but a record executive in the legitimate boardrooms). It's fitting, then, that the "business plan" for the Wu-Tang's success would be repeated by Marvel a decade later in the movie franchising of their comic-book heroes, and what's more, that the movies in this franchise would on balance lend themselves to neoliberal readings.[7] As Jay-Z would say of hip hop—"This is black superhero music right here, baby"—so too Ice Cube would say of *Straight Outta Compton*. "Marvel got their thing, but we got our thing too," he said, claiming that N.W.A. would be "the real superheroes this summer."[8]

Perhaps they were. If N.W.A. had become summer superheroes, such that even Marco Rubio wasn't advised against championing them, then Martin Shkreli was their counterpart. Ghostface called out Shkreli as a "fake-ass supervillain."[9] He seemed bemused by their tangling. "I don't even know how it came to this," Ghostface says, how "in, like, 2016" he should be in a faceoff with "Peter Pan" (as he called Shkreli). Notable in Ghostface's address of Shkreli is his invocation of the date. In this he implies that in order to understand "how it came to this," how, that is, Shkreli came to insert himself in a hip-hop imaginary, one would need to add some "real" history to the cultural history that hip hop had developed in parallel.

This essay, though it cannot track the long history of these cultural forms, means

to reckon with this moment of late-capitalist theater in which a “soft killer” like Shrkeli can trade on hip hop in an effort to make his right to profit as legitimate as any other black kid in the inner city struggling to survive. Selling drugs is selling drugs, Shkreli wants us to think, from Compton to Big Pharma. My argument is that while *Straight Outta Compton* might have received Rubio’s dispensation, it’s everywhere been the case that recent Hollywood cinema has churned the symbolic value of blackness. The point of this churning, I believe, has been to imagine the moral order of free enterprise through appeals to the righteousness of black struggle.[10]

Though the Oscars became a flashpoint in our recent debates about institutional racism, they are but an epiphenomenon of the exchange between real and symbolic economies. What they index is urgent, without question, but whether the Oscars remain a relevant index is an open question. Host Chris Rock staged the same joke in this year’s broadcast as he did when hosting in 2005: he went to a black neighborhood (this time Compton, the first time Harlem) and asked if people had seen the movies nominated, and no one had. Hence what I mean to do, here, is offer a survey of recent movies sensitized to the value blackness holds in Hollywood’s symbolic economy, then relate this survey, briefly, to the robust visual culture emerging from the #Black Lives Matter movement. In a sense *Straight Outta Compton* is the movie of its moment, not so much because it illuminates social events but because it at once divulges the internal logic of the Hollywood system and shows why social events are a matter of indifference to it.



Raekwon’s first album.



GZA’s first album.

From open markets to credit crisis

What gives recent Hollywood cinema a degree of period integrity, curiously, is its return to the Cold War (i.e. a possible alternative to capitalism) in the same moment it reckons with the free-market cataclysm of the Great Recession. Sometimes this has been a matter of communism in Hollywood’s backyard —*Trumbo* (Roach, Bleecker Street, 2015) tells the story of Hollywood’s blacklist, and *Hail, Caesar!* (Coen, Universal, 2016) invents a story about Communist writers diverting Hollywood money to Soviet agents—and at these times it seems the movies are weighing whether or not they can or should be politically effective. But at other times, when it’s ostensibly the political systems themselves being weighed, there is a feeling that the history of African-Americans must be effaced if Cold War historiography is to be politically spun in the right way.



In *Bridge of Spies*, young people risk their lives to scale the Berlin Wall.



In Brooklyn, young people scale fences as a matter of childhood fun.

Consider briefly *Bridge of Spies* (Spielberg, Touchstone, 2015). The ideological content of the Cold War is bracketed, largely, so that Spielberg can tell the story of systems by way of the interpersonal story of two equally noble men, US diplomat James Donovan (Tom Hanks) and Soviet spy Rudolf Abel (Mark Ryland), both committed to the individual enactment of the best parts of their political systems. Though the movie suggests that, tactically, the U.S. and Soviet systems are equal, its main interest is to declare that these are two good men.[11] But in a rhyming image the movie suggests that if tactically their systems are the same, morally they are not. In East Berlin, Donovan looks out the elevated train window and sees young people rushing for the Berlin Wall, but they are mercilessly shot down by border guards. Back home in Brooklyn, though, Donovan again looks out an elevated train window and sees young people rushing for a fence between one backyard and another, but this time the young people are free to scale the fence and vault carefree to the other side.

This is the difference between a repressive and an open society. The young people in Brooklyn, it bears noting, are white. It's hard to watch their freedom from repression and not think of the Civil Rights struggles that were coextensive with the Cold War. In this period one might have seen the "Little Rock Nine" on television, or reports of Medgar Evers's home terrorized in the same way as was the Donovan home. But such struggle doesn't figure into *Bridge of Spies*. In its final frames, the movie tells us that Donovan had another diplomatic victory in Cuba, but it does not tell us that as the president of the New York City Board of Education he was unsympathetic to school desegregation. A colleague said that while "Jim Donovan had done some liberal things in his life," it was nonetheless the case that "he was completely inept in race relations."[12] Perhaps, then, what we are seeing is the open society not as Donovan had encountered it but as he imagined it. This would be thoroughly Spielbergian: a reconstruction of the patriarch as he appeared to himself. Concerned as he is with patriarchal affect, Spielberg has periodically found ways to square his cinema with African-American history, but it seems that in *Bridge of Spies* he had to efface it to make Cold War historiography a tidier project.

In the other significant Cold War movie, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E* (Ritchie, Warner Bros., 2015) remakes a TV show originally run in peak years (1964-1968) of the Cold War. The movie, unlike the show, evokes blackness rather insistently. In its opening sequence, 16 mm footage of East Berlin is scored to Roberta Flack's "Compared to What," and then the closing sequence is scored to Nina Simone's "Take Care of Business." But these musical cues don't make sense historically because the movie is set in 1963 and Flack's song was released in 1969 and Simone's song in 1965. So the songs aren't meant as accurate period detail. Nor do they make sense narratively, because the Civil Rights mood they set falls outside the story. It's worth supposing, however, that the version of the '60s that interests the movie is one structured by the availability of blackness as a stylistic option. This, in Tom Wolfe's cynical account, is the '60s as the birth of "radical chic," from the licentious themes of rhythm and blues music to the iconic fashion of the Black Panthers.[13] In the movie black style seems available to some, but not others; it's available to Gaby Teller (Alicia Vikander), for instance, a British spy who does a lip-sync rendition of Solomon Burke's "Cry to Me". The audience of her song, the Russian spy Illya Kuryakin (Armie Hammer) is obviously denied the option—he is without style, even without blood, so the movie jokes.

He blushes at her seductive display. His Russianness, we recognize, is meant not simply as a matter of political unfreedom, but as a kind of bodily and expressive unfreedom. Politics has been coded as style. This has long been part of the ideological history of the Cold War, and we can attend to its form as it has been telescoped for us in the Berlin Wall speeches of Presidents Kennedy and Reagan.



In something of a play on Tom Cruise's famous lip-sync in *Risky Business*, Gaby Teller dances (background) to Solomon Burke's "Cry to Me" while Illya Kuryakin (foreground) stolidly plays chess.

The "armed guards and checkpoints" first restrict "the right to travel," Reagan said, which is to say one's bodily freedom. But in his speech he quickly converts this from an issue of free bodies into one of economic freedom: the Marshall Plan, the *Wirtschaftswunder*, reduced tariffs, free trade, and lowered taxes. This trajectory, naturalized by now, is what lets the movie so lightly joke about Illya the Russian spy's style without it seeming politically committed. It's the same operation, this historical flattening, that lets the movie make black culture of the Civil Rights era the stuff of style rather than politics. Hence if we are to recover the politics of Gaby Teller's performance of Solomon Burke, we would have to recall the itinerary of the song: written by Bert Berns and recorded by Solomon Burke, it instantiates the often strained musical partnership between Jewish-American and African-American culture that has marked jazz and rhythm and blues alike.[14] The song was then retailed by the Rolling Stones for white audiences as part of a movement that mined R&B charts for Pop hits. Gaby Teller's Britishness, hence, reminds us of this buried history at bottom of what culminated in the "British Invasion." But her Britishness relates, too, to James Bond, the British spy who made espionage a drama of perfect stylishness, not geopolitics, and who was the model for the American Napoleon Solo, protagonist of *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*



The Russian spy is embarrassed as the frisky British spy tempts him to dance with her.



Illya must rub his hands together—which, the movie implies, would otherwise be cold as marble—before he touches Gaby's flesh.

This is how scrambled the politics of contemporary Hollywood, particularly its racial politics, have become. One sees this not only in today's reassessments of the Cold War, but in the effort to take on the recent financial crisis. In the last year, two movies—the notable *The Big Short* and the slight *99 Homes*—narrated the housing market collapse of 2008-09. These stories might have been expected vehicles for African-Americans, considering how disproportionate an effect the crisis had on black wealth: compare a 31% decline per black household to an 11% one per white household.[17] The predatory practices that drove the subprime market tended to target elderly and minority communities. Black borrowers making more than $200,000 a year, a study found, were "more likely to receive subprime loans than white families making less than $30,000."[18] But neither movie anchors its narrative in this demographic fact. Rather both movies tell the story, as many other stories were told this year, from the perspective of entrepreneurs—cf. *Ex Machina* (Garland, A24, 2015), *Steve Jobs* (Boyle, Universal, 2015), and *Joy* (Russell, 20th Century Fox, 2015). What separates the movies is their moral regard for entrepreneurs, particularly when their enterprises come out of dispossession. Indeed, *99 Homes* feels like a morality play, with the entrepreneur Rick Carver (Michael Shannon) embodying Greed and the dispossessed homeowner Dennis Nash (Andrew Garfield) embodying Desperation. When driving through a neighborhood of "For Sale" signs and darkened homes, Carver tells Nash that he's seen "nine opportunities" on the last block, that if Nash tunes his vision this way he too will see opportunity where others do not. Ultimately, the movie hangs on Nash's decision to emulate Carver or reject him. But it hangs on this, we might say, because it finds dramatic interest in the collapsing ideology of the white property owner whose "family home" is the



In *99 Homes*, Rick Carver drives around subdivisions and does not see family homes, but business opportunities.



It is better to own a home than build one.



The white homeowner takes arms in defense of his home.

public mark of his authority. It is of marginal interest—and as a ready supply of pathos—that a black family and an elderly man are foreclosed on, too. The central interest lies in the declassing of the white male, still vital and still capable of building communities, but pushed instead to break them down into assets and sell them at different, more abstract levels of the market.



99 Homes: Foreclosure on a black family is less central to the main narrative.



Foreclosure on an elderly man, too, is a dramatic afterthought.

Here is where *The Big Short* comes in. In it, there is no trace of the social problem film, nor anything of the morality play. Conspicuously, the only black actor is at the top of the hierarchy. Adepero Oduye plays Kathy Tao, the liaison between Morgan Stanley and Mark Baum's fund, FrontPoint. When Baum's team actually surveys the damage on the ground to homeowners, they speak with a Latino man (Oscar Gale) who learns he is on the bad end of a rental contract. This man appears in the film's final scenes, his family and belongings packed into their car. But overall the face of the dispossessed homeowner is a stripper's. In a comic scene, Baum pays for a private dance so that he can learn the details of a stripper's mortgages (she has five houses, we learn, and one condo). This is a target market of an unseemly mortgage broker, who likes making loans to strippers because they are cash rich but have no credit history nor any income verification, and hence are susceptible to subprime products.



In the course of *The Big Short*, a Latino man learns that his rent has not gone toward the mortgage.

What this means for the movie, however, is that it can play more comfortably in a comic register. The victim of the "big short" position of the title is not the homeowners who will be evicted, but the entire banking system whose overconfidence in a rigged system left it highly exposed. It's a comedy, that is, because its protagonists are all lovable misfits ("a few outsiders and weirdos") who critique the system from within but avoid being crushed beneath it. In fact, the "weirdos" profit. It's *Revenge of the Nerds* set in the world of high finance. Only in off moments does the movie force a reckoning with what befalls "average people" on the other side of the process. "You just bet against the American economy," Ben Rickert (Brad Pitt) tell his colleagues, "which means if we're right, people lose homes, people lose jobs, people lose retirement savings." And this toll is not something the movie can depict—it tells us this much—because it's unavailable for depiction as such. Pop culture distorts it, deflects from it. Hence the movie's joke that Selena Gomez will now clarify for you the function of a synthetic CDO.



In the final scenes of *The Big Short*, we see that the Latino man has been evicted and has now packed his family and belongings into his car.

Banking, though, manages what pop culture fails to imagine. "You know what I hate about fucking banking," Rickert asks, "it reduces people to numbers. Here's a number: every one percent unemployment goes up, 40,000 people die. Did you know that?" The point of the movie is that we do not know that, and that in some important sense we *cannot know that* because the kind of knowledge we would need to have—the kind that produces action—is qualitative, not quantitative.

	
The Big Short: Mortgage brokers have found it profitable to lend to strippers, who are cash-rich but have no credit history.	Immigrants are another target demographic for unscrupulous mortgage brokers.
	
Because pop culture deflects our attention from economic injustice, *The Big Short* imagines a pop culture that would return our focus to it.	A cooking show might become a metaphor for financial transactions.

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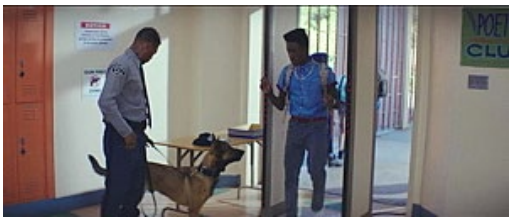
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Straight Outta Compton: A young Dr. Dre is lost in music.



Dre's mom harangues him for not taking advantage of job opportunities.



In *Dope*, Malcolm escapes an underprivileged high school for the privileges of Harvard.



In *Creed*, Adonis is frustrated by his white-collar job.

"The strength of street knowledge": hip hop and frontier economics

None of the above is surprising. It's not that Hollywood movies are, categorically, unable to engage social events qualitatively. But it's no secret that Hollywood is soothed by quantitative thinking. Studio heads keep their jobs when they show profit. In recent months, for instance, Warner Bros. executives have tried to fend off the qualitative rejection of the DC comics movies by citing their early box-office embrace. This defense works until the qualitative response catches up with the quantitative, as it did with *Batman v Superman* (Snyder, Warner Bros., 2016). [19] [open notes in new window] In the recent *Money Monster* (Foster, TriStar, 2016), in fact, when a hedge fund publicist must frantically search for the firm's "quant," it's easy to imagine it as the movie's own desperate bid to produce a quantitative proof to Hollywood that movies such as itself, from the near-extinct "midbudget" sector, should still be made. Indeed, Relativity Media staked its existence on a claim to having such data—an algorithm, they said, that could predict a movie's performance—but CEO Ryan Kavanaugh lost credibility when his company filed for Chapter 11 last year. Thomas Tull, though, a "quant" of a different kind, bet rather that the $100 million tentpole was the more stable market. A premise of his bet, however, is that a production needs to come from "presold" property, such as a comic book or a video game; it can't be original material. "It's very hard to build a new thing," Tull admitted.[20]

Thus when forming Legendary Pictures in 2000, he began with Batman, moved on to Superman, and mixed it up with Frank Miller's *300* (Snyder, Warner Bros., 2007). What is surprising about *Straight Outta Compton*, then, is that Tull would produce it among the first of his Universal projects despite it being a midbudget biopic seemingly outside his bailiwick of comics and gaming. He had supplemented his tentpole productions with midbudget movies, it's worth noting, but they had been based in his other passion, sports (cf. *We Are Marshall* [McG, Warner Bros., 2006] and *42* [Helgeland, Warner Bros., 2013]). But one can imagine *Straight Outta Compton* fitting perfectly within the Legendary canon, defined as it is by comic-book heroes and sports legends, because Tull is known as a "fanboy" and he believes the like is his target market. "This is my group," he has said, "They like stuff I like."[21] Hip hop is on the same Venn diagram, and *Straight Outta Compton* is presented in fanboy tones (hence it omits Dr. Dre's assault of female journalist Dee Barnes). More than this, for a self-styled entrepreneur such as Tull whose mission was to bring private equity markets to Hollywood, *Straight Outta Compton* is a bildungsroman of the entrepreneur, following Eazy, Dre, and Cube as they grow into businessmen, and their business is the sort that turns childhood passions into a specialized product over which only the adult child has mastery.

What is so surprising about *Straight Outta Compton*, finally, is that it seems to urge the renewal of capitalism in the moment that *The Big Short* sought to remind us how near it recently was to collapse. It seemed the least likely movie—had we taken bets—for such boosterism. But in the wake of the credit crisis, free-market ideologues have pushed back against proclamations that "We Are All Socialist Now" and instead doubled down on "'entrepreneurial' capitalism with robust competition and incessant 'creative destruction'," as Cato Institute fellow Brink



So he becomes a boxer instead.



Straight Outta Compton: When Dre is stopped after a high-speed chase, his rights are respected by the arresting officers.



This contrasts with the police's coarse treatment of Ice Cube's parents.



Rather than setting Dre's high-speed chase in Beverly Hills, the movie reimagines it as an L.A. noir.

Lindsey puts it, as a bulwark against "heavy-handed industrial policy, cronyism, and corporatism."[22] In this defense, the figure of the black entrepreneur has been an alibi. *Fortune*, for instance, singles out black female-owned businesses as the largest growing demographic, having increased 322% since 1997. And Steve Forbes would say that Jay-Z, first a rapper and then the Def Jam CEO, "epitomizes the essence of the American entrepreneurial system," and his success only attests to the "wonders of free enterprise," defined, for Forbes, by its "openness to newcomers."[23]

It can look like "openness," today, but no record labels would distribute hip hop when it came out, which is why in 1983 Rick Rubin and Russell Simmons began Def Jam and made millions (they released LL Cool J, Beastie Boys, Public Enemy). They were entrepreneurs of necessity. The same can be said of the spike in black female-owned businesses. "We attribute the growth in women-owned firms to the lack of fair pay, fair promotions, and family-friendly policies in corporate America," says Margot Dorfman, CEO of the US Women's Chamber of Commerce. "Women of color, when you look at the statistics, are impacted more significantly by all of the negative factors that women face. It's not surprising that they have chosen to invest in themselves."[24] The "openness," here, is part of the rhetorical armature that would re-describe necessity as liberty.

Blurring that line (between economic necessity and liberty) has let the powerful speak in the language of the powerless. "I view myself as a person," Donald Trump has recently said, "that—like everybody else—is fighting for survival."[25] When Brink Lindsey argues for "creative destruction," indeed, he makes his appeal to a "frontier economics."[26] It's not a matter of the geopolitical frontiers of capitalism (i.e. China's opening economy, India's, or the "tiger economies"), which are sites of "catch-up growth," Lindsey says, but a matter of internal frontiers. Rich economies can't keep doing what they're doing, can't simply extend the processes already in place, but must open new frontiers within by way of innovation. But some forms of innovation, Thomas Frank says of "financial engineering," give a bad name to the innovation-dependent "creative economy"; they wear out these once valorized concepts.[27]

Consider a scene in *The Big Short*. In an English pub Ben Rickert trades a credit default swap by phone, when the bartender overhears him quoting figures on the order of a hundred million dollars. "What are you, a drug dealer or a banker," the bartender asks, "because if you're a banker, you can fuck right off." Though Lindsey considers the "frontier" a matter of technology as much as anything else, like the Kennedy administration did when it invoked Manifest Destiny in its New Frontier, for the metaphor to work, to stir the imagination, it needed a frontiersman to embody it. The New Frontier had the astronaut, but the economic frontier had only the banker making esoteric deals on Blackberry, laptop, or Bluetooth.

Next to this Eazy-E strikes quite a figure. He could sound plausibly like a contemporary outlaw in the Wild West of Compton when, on N.W.A.'s first album, he rapped, "I got a six-shooter, yo I'm mean and brave." The tropes were in place already, from the swaggering country blues of "John Hardy" and the folk tradition before it, and in Eazy's case he was riffing on more recent entries such as the Beastie Boys' story about "a little horsey named Paul Revere" and the "sheriff's posse on my tail" (the song, "8 Ball," most prominently sampled from the Beastie Boys' "Paul Revere," "Girls," and others). But when the Beasties called themselves outlaws, their imagery was cartoonish, whereas when Eazy-E did, it fit with narratives of rising gang violence on the West Coast: his imagery, thus, seemed naturalistic. The most deregulated space in the national imaginary became Compton, thanks in no small part to N.W.A., and its entrepreneurs were called hustlers, and there are two reasons you can't knock the hustle: it's a matter of



Police use a tank to enter a dope house.



Police in Torrance, California harass N.W.A. when they step out from the recording studio.



In the movie's opening image, it shows that behind the music lies the economy of the streets.



Straight Outta Compton was made by production companies owned by Ice Cube and Dr. Dre.



necessity, and it's a force of class rise.

What makes *Straight Outta Compton* so curious, then, is its commitment to telling stories that on their face are systemic (economic necessity, social class) but in individualist terms. In an early scene, Dr. Dre (Corey Hawkins) is so wrapped up in his music that he misses a job interview that his mom had arranged for him . They argue. "I already know what I want to do with my life," Dre tells her, "and it definitely ain't sitting in some cubicle takin' orders on a bullshit-ass job."

Growing up in Compton, this suggests, the options are not appreciably different than in any other suburb in America: it's the stability of a desk job, or the self-fulfillment (and risk) of creative endeavor. Today, Dre's remark might resonate with college kids launching start-ups for the same reason. In this perspective, the system looks virtuous, and hip hop is not a critique but an affirmation of it. Success in hip hop, like any enterprise, means betting on oneself. In this sensibility the movie joins others such as *Dope* and *Creed* in placing black experience either here or there on a trajectory into the elite class. The latter two movies must contort their genres in imagining this: in *Dope* Malcolm (Shameik Moore) makes it out of his Inglewood high school and into Harvard by pulling off an improbable drug deal, and in *Creed* the son of Apollo Creed, Adonis (Michael B. Jordan), belongs in the elite class by birth but nonetheless rejects the jobs offered him to pursue instead an option typically left to the poverty class: boxing. [28]

Consider in this light the scene from *Straight Outta Compton* in which Dre leads police on a high-speed chase. After zig-zagging through traffic, Dre is stopped at a police barricade with a helicopter circling overhead, but his arrest is peaceful, his civil rights left intact. Compare this to an early scene of Ice Cube being harassed for no reason ("I ain't explaining shit to you," the cop tells him), and his parents being intimidated for trying to help him ("I will ruin your fucking night," the cop tells his mom), and it seems clear that what is being narrated are the privileges of Dre's new class position. He's no longer in Compton, where no rights apply; he's on an affluent police-beat. But the movie doesn't exactly address this: it makes it seem he's racing through downtown L.A. when in fact arrest records show it to have been Beverly Hills. In selecting this mise-en-scene the movie invests in a kind of L.A. noir—multiple lanes of traffic, the glare of streetlights overhead, skyscrapers illuminated from bottom story to top—but at the expense of a systemic critique of the policing patterns throughout the city: How are police disposed differently, it might have demonstrated, in a Beverly Hills arrest and a Compton arrest?

The only thing curious about *Straight Outta Compton* swerving from issues of a systemic kind is that its makers would have expected it to be understood within the horizon of the #Black Lives Matter movement. Principal photography began in August 2014, and a few days later Michael Brown was shot down by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. Themovie's shooting script was in place already, true, but it would now resonate more deeply with a conversation then unfolding. In the opening scene, for instance, Eazy-E (Jason Mitchell) goes into a dope house which has been under surveillance and is shortly demolished by an armored police vehicle. The scene would cross-reference debates about the militarization of the police force. So it was inevitable that the movie become vehicle for these issues, inevitable because N.W.A. is still most famous for its anthem, "Fuck tha Police."

And while the movie does deal with police violence and racial profiling, those issues get reduced to a stage in a process both aesthetic and commercial. In the midst of recording their debut album in Torrance, California, the members of N.W.A. step outside the studio for lunch break. Outside Compton, it's implied,

A separate card is given to the production company of Eazy-E's widow.



The end credits note the billion-dollar acquisition of Dre's company, Beats.



Dre with his business protégés, 50 Cent and Eminem.

their uniform of black Raiders and Yankees gear is alarming. Police pull up, shouting for the group to drop to the ground, before their manager, Jerry Heller (Paul Giamatti), comes to their defense. "What are you crazy," he objects, "That's police harassment. You can't come down here and harass these guys because they're black—people have rights." Though angry, the members of N.W.A. are well-behaved, and if Ice Cube in particular seems anxious to say his piece, he instead remains silent and returns to the studio where he sublimates his anger in song: "Fuck tha Police" roars forth, an aesthetic correction to a social problem.

From there the group tours the country and the police run-in is put to canny use not only as the raw material in their aesthetic production, but as a marketing lever for it. When the FBI sends them a strongly-worded warning to desist from playing their song, it's Eazy-E that senses opportunity. "This right here is a gift," he tells the others,

> "This is free publicity for N.W.A. We take this to the press and we show them what type of intimidation, discrimination, and harassment that we dealing with from our government."

What we see in this is how their outsider status, their oppression and persecution, puts them in a privileged position to open new markets. Craig Watkins notes the "paradox" that an "intensification of racial and economic polarization in the United States produces space for the emergence of cultural practices that derive much of their symbolic efficacy from locations of marginality."[29] Producing space, here, is making a market that wasn't intelligible as such. Watkins's paradox is that their proprietary relation to it comes from being marginalized. Branded by state officials, Eazy accepts the brand and monetizes it.

This is what is meant by "the strength of street knowledge," the brash declaration which opens N.W.A.'s debut album. Street knowledge is the authority to command a market. But if the movie is only half interested in police violence in itself, or in the LA Riots in themselves, it is fully interested in how street knowledge is formalized as corporate strategy. Eazy is the figure of street knowledge, and the agent of its conversion into something else. The movie's opening image communicates this much: fade into Eazy opening his car trunk, he unscrews the stereo speaker from its case, and within the cabinet lies a bag of dope—behind the music, we're told, is the economy of the streets.

In a subsequent scene, Dre tells Eazy, "You can sling dope, you can sling records." Part of the drama stems from Eazy needing to make his illicit gains legitimate. He can only do this, Jerry Heller tells him, with the latter's help. "I can make you legit," Jerry promises, "I can get you into that building." Jerry has access to the establishment, in other words, but the point of the movie will be that in this moment of industrial transformation N.W.A. represents an establishment vanguard while Jerry represents its old guard. Jerry expects to cherrypick the star, Eazy-E, and nurture his career at the expense of the others; his error is to believe that N.W.A. is the vehicle of Eazy-E as the Supremes was for Diana Ross. In turn, he needs but one signature: Eazy-E's.

The drama of the movie, therefore, becomes a drama of contract. Ice Cube, the group lyricist, thinks he's undercompensated for his part, and he leaves before Jerry and Eazy can put him under contract. When Cube's solo record *Amerikkka's Most Wanted* charts higher than N.W.A. has, Jerry assures Eazy, "The fact is, Ren is as good a writer as Cube, maybe even better." This plays as a joke for a contemporary audience who will know full well the asymmetrical influence Ren and Cube have had on hip hop. The joke loops back to the original meeting between Jerry and Eazy when Jerry marshaled his credentials ("Elton John, War, Styx, REO Speedwagon") and Eazy asked, "You manage anybody this decade?" The object of ridicule is not only Jerry's ineptitude at identifying talent of this new

kind, but his failure to imagine how to manage talent in this new regime. Seeing in N.W.A. only one act was a failure to see in it three acts. The group was ready to spin out careers for Eazy, Dre, and Cube, but because Jerry is committed to a superannuated model of stardom, he misses the big payout.

The payouts are frittered away, we see; so many record companies are begun that coining names for them (Ruthless, Death Row, Aftermath) is troped in the movie as a kind of corporate parlor game; money—and this is the final, affectionate message—is left on the table. What Eazy could not do is make a franchise out of N.W.A. and monopolize a market he was helping to open up. It's the bildungsroman of Eazy's incomplete formation as a businessman. One strain in hip hop, indeed, has been intent on fragmenting the market and controlling a niche rather than broadly operating it; the "beef" has been the technology of such market division. In the movie's later scenes, Eazy makes amends with Cube and Dre because he knows now their centrality in realizing his project. "We shouldn't have dissed each other in the first place," Cube tells Eazy, "Making the fans choose between us? That wasn't cool." The movie was made in partnership between Ice Cube's company, Cube Vision, Dre's Crucial Films, and Broken Chair Flickz (once Eazy-E's company, now his widow's) and in these final scenes the input Cube and Dre had into the movie is easy to detect. They grant Eazy his entrepreneurial vision in the line of dialogue "I'm the Berry Gordy of this shit" but there's nonetheless the palpable regret that he might have been the Russell Simmons of this new form.



Beyoncé dropped the video for "Formation" on the Internet in preparation for her television appearance at the Super Bowl.

Embedded in this reflection on Eazy-E, that is, is a reflection on hip hop as a modular form whose logic, we must note, undergirds today's franchise filmmaking. Consider how a hip-hop track is credited: the main act first, followed by all those "featured" on the track; the effect on an MP3 player, then, is that rather than list an album under one act it subspeciates into several acts. It's a



In “Formation,” Beyoncé evoked various crises in the black community, but especially the policing crisis that led to #Black Lives Matter.



Kendrick Lamar’s appearance at the Grammy’s was performance art.



In Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, she shows Trayvon Martin’s mother holding his picture.



Michael Brown’s mother holding his picture.

unitary form that calls attention to the integrity of its components. J. D. Connor has described franchise filmmaking in terms of componentry, a matter of “arrangement, exchange, and interaction.”[30] This can explain why the catchphrase from *Friday*, “Bye, Felicia,” is dropped somewhat gratuitously into *Straight Outta Compton*: the one must refer to the other in an enterprise of “world-building,” as Connor calls it, where each strengthens the integrity of the other. This is Ice Cube’s media world, we are reminded, with his preferred director F. Gary Gray once again stitching together its units. In the movie’s final sequence we are reminded, too, that Dre learned his lesson after recording albums for Eazy and Jerry, and then Suge Knight—“Just focusing on the music,” he tells Suge, not the contracts—to focus rather on deploying his brand across the market. The end credits document Apple’s $3 billion acquisition of Dre’s Beats, a headphone company founded by the rapper and Jimmy Iovine. In these credits, Eminem is shown saying that Dre “taught me a lot, not just rap-wise but business-wise.” Hip-hop lessons and business lessons are structurally equivalent, so much so that when marketing the movie Universal executive Doug Neil had movie trailers customized for demographic segments on Facebook. Research told Neil that for a white audience Dre was “the face of Beats” and Cube was an actor; for this demographic the movie was pitched not as the biopic of a rap group but of media moguls.[31]

Get in-formation: new media and black visual culture

It seems only natural that as a biopic produced by its subjects, *Straight Outta Compton* would give them a hagiographic treatment, that lionized individuality, in the end, would be its upshot. If despite the events it depicts the movie only weakly resonates with today’s events, this might owe to the conditions of Hollywood art—its high capital outlay, production timetables, and the obstinacy of its forms are all paid for (potentially, anyway) in social irrelevance. Chris Rock is right. In a moment of crisis, the moment of #Black Lives Matter, Hollywood has nothing much to say.

Yet the #Black Lives Matter movement rests so much on imagery. Controlling the narrative of Trayvon Martin, for instance, meant controlling which picture of him circulated and whether this image would license calling him a “thug.” The moment was defined by surveillance footage and dash cams, by when the footage of Michael Brown’s shooting began and how much of Sandra Bland’s arrest was offscreen.[32] And moreover, what has emerged in response to the crisis has been an agonized, often defiant visual culture. Beyoncé’s “Formation” video dropped on the eve of the Super Bowl, Kendrick Lamar’s Grammy performance, and so on. Beyoncé, in fact, has contributed to debates over the “death of the album” by suggesting in *Lemonade* that in its reimagined form it will be “visual.”

For all that Hollywood traffics in imagery, this seems to suggest that it’s been displaced from the center of visual culture. Critic Wesley Morris has recently attributed this to the way that Hollywood franchises have dimmed star power (stars such as Christian Bale and Ben Affleck get to play Batman, but Batman is ultimately the star) while stardom has migrated to the Internet where it can seem “unmediated” to its consumers.[33] The Internet does seem to have immediacy of various kinds: if Beyoncé wishes to prepare fans for her Super Bowl performance, she can do so on the Internet at any hour. Television, too, can establish a feedback loop with events in the offing in ways movies cannot. Hence Shonda Rhimes’s ABC show *Scandal* can make the episode “The Lawn Chair,” which deals with the shooting of a 17-year-old black man by a white cop, and it can be timed to coincide with the Department of Justice’s findings on the Ferguson Police Department; and *Empire* (a Fox show about a hip-hop mogul whose empire is built on an original investment of drug money) can take the same topic as does *Straight*

Outta Compton—the industrialization of hip-hop culture—but let it open onto new-media transformation as the more relevant object of inquiry.



Eric Garner's mother holding his picture.



Beyoncé stands on top a sinking police car.

In a sense what is at stake is mediality itself, the moment when something becomes an image event and who behind the scenes can shape it. The power of the Internet, in this respect, is that it seems to denarrativize the image event. Consider the shots in *Lemonade* of the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner holding pictures of their sons. They are not strictly nonnarrative; they are fitted, now, into another narrative Beyoncé is constructing. But they are now pried, these sons of theirs, from the national narrative formed around them. Beyoncé's visual album plays in an idiom quite different from Hollywood's classical narrative: it is impressionistic; its protagonist seems plural rather than singular, it is Black women, a generational protagonist cast in deep time; it is thus out of Julie Dash or Terrence Malick, not Hollywood. There are cynics who will question if Beyoncé helps #Black Lives Matter or if she uses it to help her brand, but a question such as this is made indeterminate by the culture industry. There is a basic wildness to the image, nevertheless, that gets tapped in both Beyoncé's "Formation" and Azealia Banks's "The Big Big Beat." In the latter it's the framing device of the narrow corridors of a correctional facility for Banks's erotic dancing that makes it seem like so much contraband. When Banks dances on top a police car, it seems like a reference to Beyoncé's "Formation," as though there might now be a tradition of Black women astride police cars.



The Big Beat: Azealia Banks dances in a correctional facility.

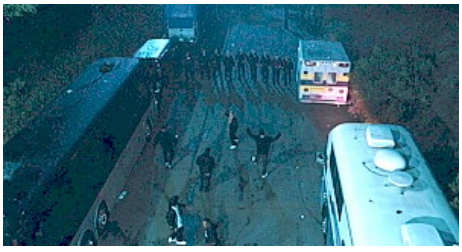


Azealia Banks dances on top a police car.

The image has been potent enough that police have organized boycotts of Beyoncé's shows, in an act reminiscent of the Detroit police protests of N.W.A. in *Straight Outta Compton*. But it's possible there is a more primal potency in the ambiguous line "Okay ladies now let's get in formation," which reads at once as a call to get in either dance or combat formation and as a call to get information. [34] That perhaps the goal is to get information in formation—that being witness to information as it is being given form is the political act—suggests how nearly synonymous controlling the media and political revolution are. This is a truth that Hollywood insulates itself against, and that the Oscars merely stage manages, but because the Internet rubs against it more regularly it's fair to say it's become the center of visual culture today.



Police gather in protest before N.W.A.'s Detroit concert.



The Detroit concert ends early when police arrest the members of N.W.A.

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Notes

1. Rubio said this in a CNN interview with Carol Costello on February 2, 2016, the morning following the Iowa caucus. See http://time.com/4205016/marco-rubio-oscars-so-white/ [return to page 1]

2. Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996), 14.

3. The hip-hop group Public Enemy's Professor Griff remarked on the fact that the 2016 Academy Awards ceremony used his group's song, "Fight the Power": "The show can't claim the blackness of Public Enemy's message." See http://pitchfork.com/news/63855-oscars-2016-public-enemys-fight-the-power-bookends-ceremony-amid-diversity-controversy-chuck-d-weighs-in/

4. In 2015 the Wu-Tang Clan held an auction for their album, "Once Upon a Time in Shaolin," of which they had made only one copy. See http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/posts/la-et-ms-wu-tang-clan-actually-found-someone-to-pay-millions-for-its-secret-album-20151124-story.html

5. The evident business savvy of the Wu-Tang Clan was the subject of a comedy sketch on "Chappelle's Show." The joke of the sketch, "Wu Tang Financial," was that while the Wu-Tang had made smart financial decisions, white investors would nonetheless never entrust their money with them, the gap between the Wu-Tang "street" sensibility and a white middle-class sensibility being insuperable.

6. Steve Jobs is the ur-example of this, for he depended on theater to make a case for his righteousness in the public eye. The difference is that while Jobs's ethical standards came under fire often enough, he was, unlike Shkreli, largely able to exculpate himself by way of this theater. Shkreli has used his theater only to intensify his "bad boy" image.

7. See Dan Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age* (Zero Books, 2012).

8. Brent Lang, "'Straight Outta Compton': Ice Cube Praises Universal Chief Donna Langley's 'Big Balls'," *Variety* April 23, 2015.

9. Ghostface made his address to Shkreli in a YouTube post: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmJGKtEwomE

10. This is not new. Stephen Metcalf has critiqued Robert Nozick, the canonical libertarian, for pressing his normative claims by recourse to the famous "Wilt Chamberlain argument," a "cynical" way, Metcalf says, to make capitalism at its purest a matter of "a black ballplayer finally getting his due." See Metcalf, "The Liberty Scam," *Slate*, June 20, 2011.

http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/the_dilettante/2011/06/the_liberty_scam.html

11. In an early scene, when Donovan meets the accused spy, Abel tells him, "Mr. Donovan, you have men like me doing the same for your country—if they were caught, I'm sure that you would wish them to be treated well." In a later scene, when U.S. and Soviet agents meet to exchange prisoners, Donovan worries, "I think they have snipers." His colleague says, "I'm sure they do… because we have snipers." The movie, that is, makes a consistent point that both sides in the Cold War employ the same tactics.

12. See David Rogers, *110 Livingston Street: Politics and Bureaucracy in the New York City School System* (New York: NYU Press, 1984), 232-233.

13. See Tom Wolfe, *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers* (New York: Picador, 2009).

14. See Michael Billig's *Rock 'n' Roll Jews* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2001) and Eric Lott *Love and Theft* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995).

15. Phil Rhodes, "Superspy Alliance," *American Cinematographer* 96.9 (Sept. 2015), 56.

16. Ibid.

17. See Jamelle Bouie, "The Crisis in Black Homeownership," *Slate*, July 24, 2014. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2014/07/black_homeownership_how_the_recession_turned_owners_into_renters_and_obliterated.html

18. Ibid.

19. See Pamela McClintock, "'*Batman v Superman*' Plunges 69 Percent in Second Weekend to $51.3M," *Hollywood Reporter*, April 1, 2016: http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/box-office-batman-v-superman-880012 [return to page 2]

20. Natalie Robehmed, "Box Office Billionaire," *Fortune*, February 10, 2016: http://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2016/02/10/the-global-mogul/#695b88735700

21. Mark R. Madler, "Almost Legendary," *San Fernando Valley Business Journal*, March 23, 2015.

22. Brink Lindsey, "Frontier Economics: Why Entrepreneurial Capitalism Is Needed Now More than Ever" (April 2011): http://www.kauffman.org/~/media/kauffman_org/research%20reports%20and%20covers/2011/04/frontier_economics_4_06.pdf

23. Steve Forbes wrote this endorsement in the Foreword to Zack O'Malley Greenburg, *Empire State of Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

24. Amy Haimerl, "The Fastest Growing Group of Entrepreneurs in America," *Fortune*, June 29, 2015: http://fortune.com/2015/06/29/black-women-entrepreneurs/

25. Trump said this in his primetime interview with Fox News' Megyn Kelly.

26. Brink Lindsey, ibid.

27. Thomas Frank, "Nor a Lender Be," *Harper's*, February 19, 2016: https://harpers.org/blog/2016/02/nor-a-lender-be/

28. Genre is a key term for discussing both these movies, but it's a discussion I will forgo here. Suffice it to say, the genres that get contorted are the high-school movie and the boxing movie. Their different itineraries are interesting, no doubt, because they are socioeconomic: the high-school movie subdivides into a middle-class and a poverty-class variant, the former usually being a matter of "youth rebellion" and the latter usually being a matter of "inner city violence." On balance *Dope* takes more from the middle-class than the poverty-class variant, making its drug-deal plot feel strangely out of place. The boxing movie, though, has only a poverty-class tradition, it seems to me, and this makes *Creed*'s middle-class iteration a genre novelty.

29. S. Craig Watkins, "Black Youth and the Ironies of Capitalism," *That's the Joint!*, eds. Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal (New York: Routledge, 2011), 698.

30. J. D. Connor, "Making Things Right," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 7, 2016: https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/making-things-right-star-wars-episode-vii-the-force-awakens

31. Nathan McAlone, "Here's Why 'Straight Outta Compton' Had Different Facebook Trailers," *Business Insider*, March 16, 2016: http://www.businessinsider.com/why-straight-outta-compton-had-different-trailers-for-people-of-different-races

32. The deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Sandra Bland were several of the key incidents behind the rise of #Black Lives Matter. For overviews of these incidents, see the following: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Trayvon_Martinhttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shooting_of_Michael_Brownhttps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Sandra_Bland

33. Wesley Morris, "The Superhero Franchise: Where Traditional Movie Stardom Goes to Die," *New York Times*, May, 19, 2016: http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/movies/in-x-men-apocalypse-and-captain-america-superheroes-versus-movie-stars.html

34. See Joshua Clover, "Get Information," *The Nation*, March 9, 2016. https://www.thenation.com/article/get-information/

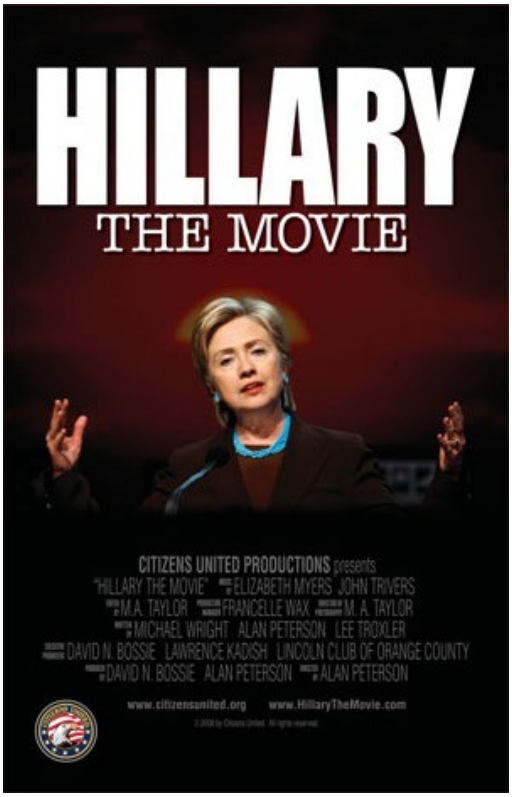
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Beyond bias: stock imagery and paradigmatic politics in Citizens United documentaries

by Scott Krzych



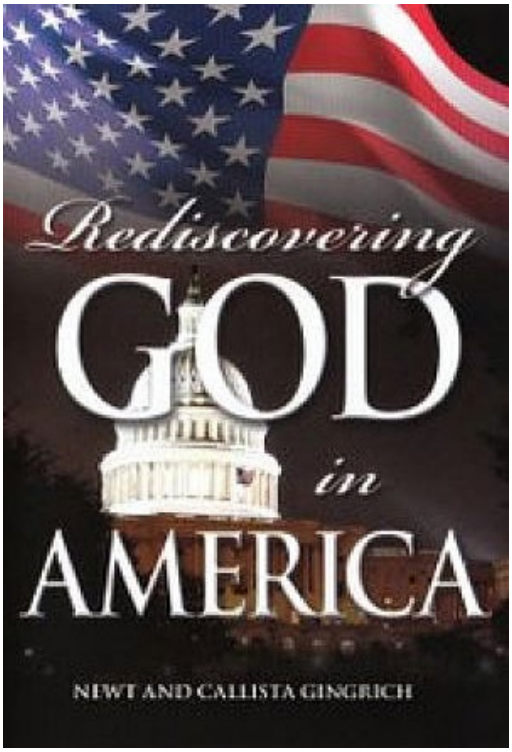
The incendiary documentary, *Hillary: The Movie*, put Citizens United on the cultural and political map.

In 2008, Citizens United, a production company specializing in direct-to-DVD political documentaries, distributed *Hillary: The Movie* (Alan Peterson), a scathing critique of Hillary Clinton. The timing of the film's release led to a court challenge by the FEC, alleging a violation of federal election laws that prohibit corporately sponsored campaign advertising within thirty days of a primary election. The case eventually appeared before the U.S. Supreme Court (*Citizens United vs. Federal Elections Commission*). In the now infamous ruling, the Court's conservative majority effectively removed limitations on corporate expenditures for political campaigns, bestowing on corporations the same right of free speech previously reserved for individuals.[1] [open endnotes in new window] The controversy surrounding the *Citizens United* decision and its impact on campaign finance in subsequent elections has perhaps diverted any media or scholarly attention away from the film on which the case originally centered, not to mention the growing library of documentaries distributed by Citizens United in the past decade. This article considers a variety of Citizens United documentaries and analyzes how the films employ traditional modes of documentary representation, a formal strategy, I argue, that provides a generic alibi for the films' otherwise polemical discourse, specifically the films' expression of a uniformly conservative, neo-liberal ideology.

Regardless of their respective subjective matter—immigration, energy, abortion, health care, cultural history, etc.—the oeuvre of Citizens United films expresses a consistent set of conservative political ideas and talking points. Self-explanatory and affirmative titles include *Rediscovering God in America* (Kevin Mitchell, 2008) and *Ronald Reagan: Rendezvous with Destiny* (Ken Knoblock, 2009), but the films more typically take antagonistic positions against progressive institutions and politicians, including such films as *Broken Promises: The United Nations at 60* (Kevin Knoblock, 2005), *ACLU: At War with America* (David N. Bossie, 2006), and *Hype*: *The Obama Effect* (Alan Peterson, 2008), among over a dozen others. As a collection, the films reiterate what Jeffrey P. Jones identifies as the "standard ideological tenets of contemporary conservatism" valorized on such other media outlets as talk-radio and *Fox News*:

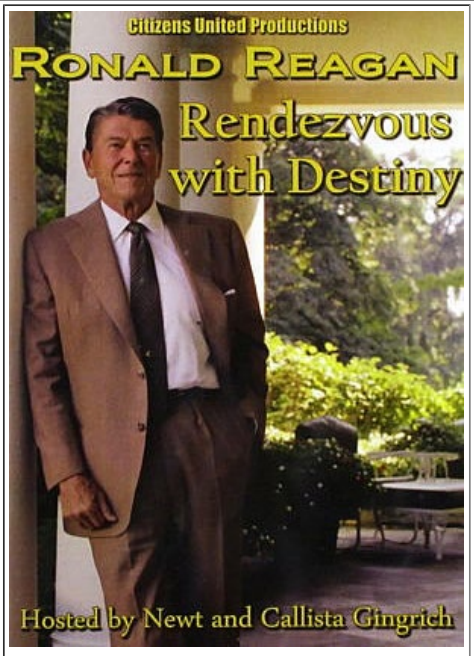
> "militaristic patriotism, patriarchal gender norms, conservative cultural 'values,' Christian religiosity, Second Amendment rights, and free market capitalism, [and also the denigration of] government, immigrants, liberals, labor unions, and non-Christian religions." [2]

The ideological content of the Citizens United films reproduce without significant qualification these conservative tenets. The more striking feature of the films,

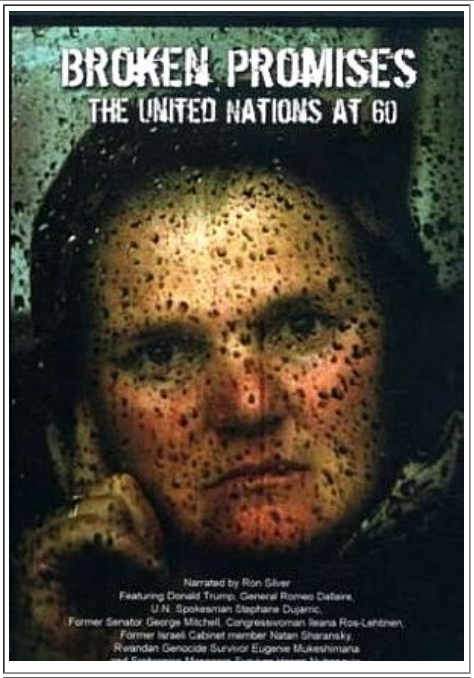


Citizens United documentary, *Rediscovering God in America,* concerning the Christian faith of the "founding fathers."

then, concerns the formal manifestation of these ideas on-screen. To call the films "documentaries," after all, is too generous an application of the term; the films resemble something more like television attack ads stretched to feature length. This extended duration, matched with the simplistic, almost automatic repetition of conservative tenets produces an aesthetic dilemma: how to fill time and (visual) space in pseudo-documentaries that include little historical research and which rely primarily on didactic interviews with conservative pundits and Republican officials?



Citizens United documentary, *Ronald Reagan*: *Rendezvous With Destiny.*



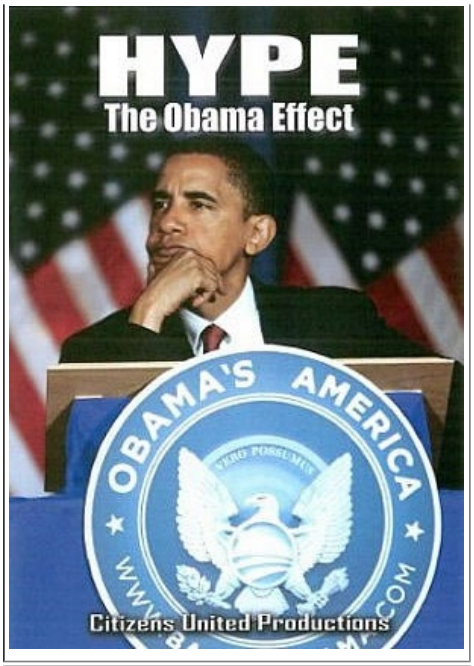
Citizens United documentary, *Broken Promises: United Nations at 60*

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Citizens United documentary, *ACLU: At War with America*

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Citizens United documentary, *Hype: The Obama Effect*

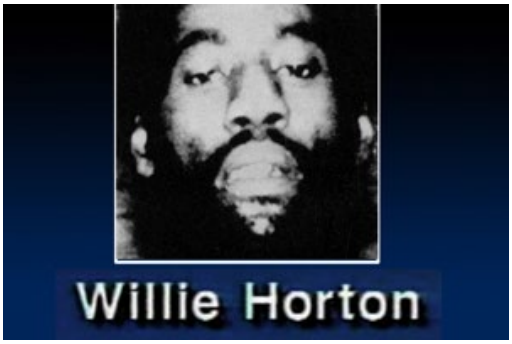
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Citizens United films appear to solve this problem by relying on stock footage—video clips professionally produced for licensing purposes—as visual illustrations of and even ostensible confirmations for their political arguments. Even when they appropriate newsreels, newspaper clippings, or other archival materials to illustrate historical narratives and political talking-points, Citizens United films demonstrate an overriding *stock logic*: the transformation of visual evidence into generic, paradigmatic images.

In Citizens United films, stock images paired with political talking-points produce a self-enclosed feedback loop in which form and subject matter become nearly indistinguishable. Rather than offering concrete explanations for historical events, Citizens United films more often avoid any account of the historical world that might be susceptible to rebuttal or even debate. The generic images, paired as they are with political speech, provide the films with a semblance of argumentation but one that never descends from the general into the particular. The ideological performances avoid the outright appearance of propaganda, however, by couching their reactionary arguments in more widely recognizable forms of documentary representation. This appeal to the generic, as well as to the expectations associated with a particular genre, is similar to the manner in which *Fox News* relies on the banner of journalism and the "traditional legitimating aspects of the genre" to validate the otherwise propagandistic speech that occurs on its network.[3] What distinguishes Citizens United films from other conservative media outlets and modes of expression, though, arises from an even more radical dissolution of any distinction between words and images, speech and evidence, stock footage and the historical archive.

Paradigmatic images

The history of Citizens United includes an early example of inflammatory political imagery. Founded by political operative Floyd Brown during the 1988 presidential campaign, Citizens United's original claim to fame was its production of the infamous "Willie Horton" television spots.[4] The ads, we may recall, portray the Democratic nominee, Governor Michael Dukakis, as soft on crime. In voice-over,



The "Willie Horton" campaign advertisement emphasizes black-on-white crime.

the narrator explains how Dukakis "allowed first degree murderers to have weekend passes from prison." One of these passes went to William Horton, an African American man serving a life sentence for murder. As Horton's mug shot appears on-screen, the narrator describes how, during one of the weekend passes, Horton kidnapped a young couple, "stabb[ed] the man and repeatedly rap[ed] his girlfriend." The ad has since served as the epitome of political mudslinging in the television era. The Horton ad not only misconstrued the facts (the prisoner furlough program was established prior to Dukakis' tenure as governor); the series of Horton ads also "were widely criticized for fueling white stereotypes of violent and criminal tendencies among young black men."[5] In other words, the ad only *appears* to criticize the policy of prisoner furlough programs; in reality, the topic of furlough programs merely provides an opportunity to associate the Democratic presidential nominee with a stereotypical image of a violent black man. Behind the apparent critique of Dukakis' policies as a governor, the real aim of the ad is a despicable appeal to racial stereotypes, including the depiction of African American men as a specifically *sexualized* threat to white women. Despite a general consensus labeling the Horton ads as racist in subsequent accounts of the election, the news media in 1988 generally overlooked the ads' racial undertones. Only in the aftermath of the election, Tali Mendelberg notes, were the campaign ads and their "implicit racial appeals" identified as such.[6]

The fact that at the time the news media could overlook a campaign ad that would later stand as a hallmark of racial stereotyping in political advertising speaks to the broader issue of stereotypes and stereotypical representation—a topic key to understanding the paradigmatic or stock images operative in the Citizens United library of films. One of the most troubling features of stereotypes, generally speaking, is the unconscious manner by which they invoke and reproduce prejudiced assumptions. Particularly in cases of racially-driven stereotypes, *implicit* assumptions about entire ethnic groups simultaneously mask and effectuate a stereotype's meaning. As W.J.T. Mitchell writes, stereotypes

> "are not special or exceptional figures, but invisible (or semivisible) and ordinary, insinuating themselves into everyday life and constituting the social screens that make encounters with other people possible—and, in a very real sense, impossible."[7]

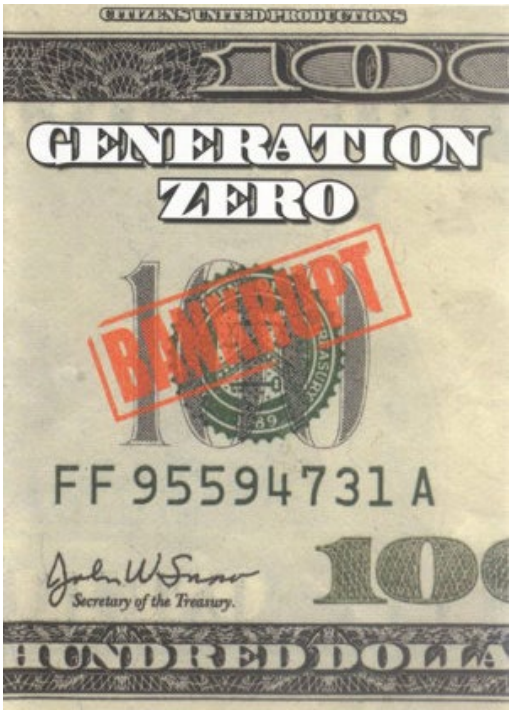
Stereotypes, Mitchell continues,

> "circulate across sensory registers from the visible to the audible, and they typically conceal themselves as transparent, hyperlegible, inaudible, and invisible cognitive templates of prejudice."[8]

The biases that ground stereotypes resist correction precisely to the extent that they delimit the world, filtering experience according to predetermined assumptions and binary categories (i.e., white/black, makers/takers, soldiers/terrorists). As a form of rhetorical shorthand, Jörg Schweinitz writes,

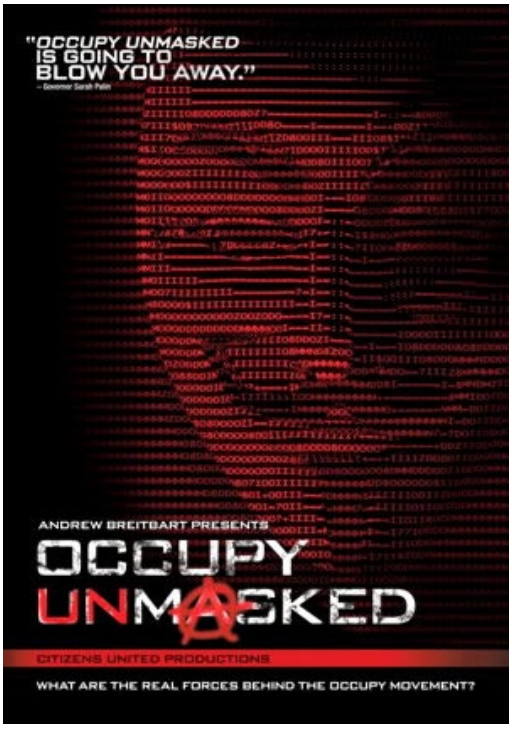
> "stereotypes, just like schemata, do not consist of complete passages of text or images, and they hardly consist of fully formed ideas."[9]

The more recent films distributed by Citizens United lack the explicit racism of the Horton ads, but the films nevertheless employ a variety of stereotypical references. My emphasis here is less on the specific content of the various stereotypes deployed by Citizens United films. Instead, I emphasize the cognitive shortcuts offered by stereotypes and other paradigmatic references as a means to



Citizens United documentary about the cultural roots of the Great Recession, *Generation Zero*

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Citizens United documentary exposing the so-called radical roots of the Occupy Wall Street movement, *Occupy Unmasked*

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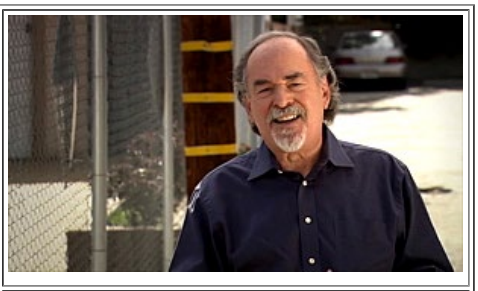
disseminate political talking-points in a manner that avoids the more rigorous expectations of political argument or debate—an economical form of political expression, in both senses of the word "economy."

The appearance of stereotypes, racial or otherwise, in several Citizens United films establish "cognitive templates of prejudice" that simplify otherwise complex topics to serve the films' ideological ends. *Generation Zero* (Stephen K. Bannon, 2010) and *Occupy Unmasked* (Stephen K. Bannon, 2012) tell histories of "leftist political radicalism" in the U.S. to contextualize, respectively, the films' explanations of the 2008 financial crisis and the roots of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Both films suggest links between the Democratic Party and the Black Panther Party in the 1960s, and both films display brief and out-of-context archival footage of African American men and women holding firearms and calling for revolution. These images of Blank Panthers, public domain footage of a 1968 demonstration at a courthouse in Oakland, California, have appeared in other documentaries concerning the 1960s and the Civil Rights movement. Here, as the Citizens United films marshal the images, the rapidly paced montages of African American "radicals" gain a politically loaded significance through the addition of staged interviews with several conservative political celebrities who read the scenes as teleological signposts. In *Occupy Unmasked*, conservative author and talk-radio host David Horowitz diagnoses "the left" as having a long-standing sympathy for violent political causes and "Black Panther tactics."[10] Horowitz draws a parallel between Black Panthers' militancy and Stalinist Russia, while an archival montage juxtaposes images of Stalin with a clip of H. Rap Brown stating,

> "Violence is as American as cherry pie."



Archival images of a Black Panther protest in *Occupy Unmasked.*



New Leftist turned conservative author, activist, and talk-radio host, David Horowitz in *Occupy Unmasked.*



Images of Joseph Stalin appear in a montage, juxtaposed with ...



... H. Rap Brown in *Occupy Unmasked*.

Taken in context, when Brown refers to the violence endemic to U.S. history, he means to implicate, specifically, violence done against African Americans during slavery, in the Jim Crow South, during the Civil Rights movement, and in countless times and places before and in-between. The sequence's editing, however, recasts his comment so as to evacuate its context, reproducing his words simply as an indication of black radicalism. This is followed by video footage of an Occupy Wall Street protestor wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the face of Che Guevera. The montage thereby suggests an historical link between present and past progressive political movements, while avoiding any thorough accounting of the Civil Rights movement and, likewise, drawing maximum rhetorical effect from the stereotype of African Americans as radical, violent, and Other.

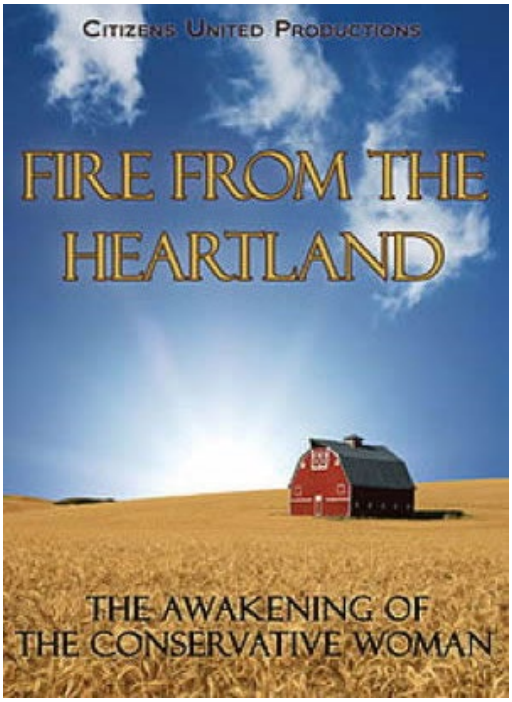


An Occupy Wall Street protestor wearing a Che Guevera t-shirt in *Occupy Unmasked*.

In addition to this reliance on racial stereotypes, the terms *socialism* or *socialist* have a similarly stereotypical function and appear with more frequency in Citizens United films. *ACLU: At War With America*, for instance,depicts the American Civil Liberties Union as a radical, "anti-American" organization, due simply to its founding by a professed socialist, Roger Baldwin. The film includes no explicit commentary to explain why an affinity for socialism should be understood as synonymous with "anti-American" sentiment, just as *Occupy Unmasked* and *Generation Zero* provide no historical background to contextualize the selected images of Black Panther Party members. Such stereotypes discount *prima facie* any political movement or social actor presumed to embody the derogatory label ascribed to them.

The examples from *Generation Zero*, *Occupy Unmasked*,and *ACLU: At War With America* rely on racial stereotypes and political biases that have circulated in conservative groups for decades. Beyond these routine rhetorical appeals, Citizens United films also demonstrate the capacity to produce new rhetorical forms to fit with any conceivable, contemporary political debate. In these cases, the schematic logic and cognitive condensations typical of stereotypes remains operative, but the rhetorical and visual content appears more flexibly attuned to the specifics of a given topic. Indeed, several films demonstrate a remarkable capacity to correlate a litany of illustrative images with an equally wide array of political talking points. Like racially-driven stereotypes, the presentations economize their arguments through the cognitive shorthand of paradigmatic language, but they also demonstrate an economical form of representation through the licensing of pre-produced stock video footage.

Most Citizens United films are composed of staged interviews. Recognizable conservative politicians and pundits speak directly into the camera, offering an array of talking points appropriate to the subject matter of the films in which they appear. The interviews occasionally appear in tandem with historical newsreels or other archival imagery, but the most typical visual accompaniments are stock video clips licensed from a small selection of production companies.[11] Compared to more typical uses of stereotypes in political media, which tend to



Citizens United documentary, *Fire From the Heartland*

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repeat biases already present in public discourse, the examples below demonstrate a more flexible, creative, and peformative capacity to construct imaginary worlds conducive to any political topic or opinion. In the following examples—I offer brief summaries of three cases—words and (stock) images function in a rhetorical feedback loop.

Fire From the Heartland: The Awakening of the Conservative Woman (Stephen K. Bannon, 2010) presents itself as a critical alternative to what the film's participants describe as feminism's destructive legacy. The all-female cast of interviewees includes Michele Bachmann, Michelle Malkin, Ann Coulter, and Phyllis Schlafly.



Talking-head interviews in *Fire From the Heartland* include appearances by former United States House of Representative Michele Bachmann. . .



... conservative commentator, Michelle Malkin . . .

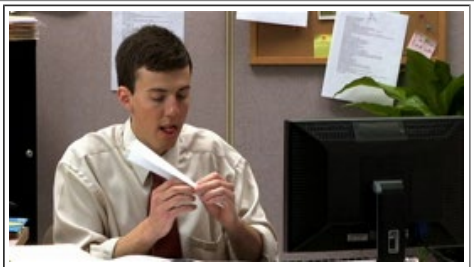


. . . conservative commentator, Ann Coulter . . .



. . . and conservative activist, Phyllis Schlafly.

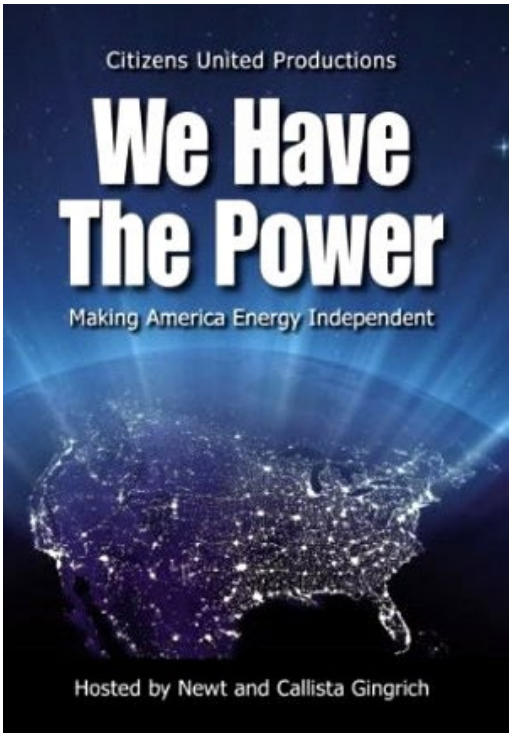
Fire From the Heartland blames the demise of patriarchy for such contemporary social ills as unemployment, failure of public education, urban crime, and more. In one of the few sequences to take aim at a specific contemporary topic, Bachmann argues that the Affordable Care Act, derisively termed Obamacare, places too much authority in the hands of the federal government. Universal healthcare coverage will produce a wide variety of negative social effects, Bachmann predicts, because the law's provision allows children to remain on their parents' health care plans until age twenty-six. Obamacare, she continues, will arrest normal psychological development and likewise produce a self-entitled, immature generation of people.



	
Stock-video of a lonely New Year's Eve celebration in *Fire From the Heartland* .	Stock-video of an "immature" office worker in *Fire from the Heartland.*

The accompanying stock video reiterates Bachmann's statement by picturing several young men engaged in presumably adolescent behavior, including a man celebrating New Years Eve alone in his apartment and a white-collar worker tossing a paper airplane over the side of his cubicle. The generic images give visual form to Bachmann's prophetic claim. That is to say, Bachmann offers a hyperbolic generalization about the future psychological effects of a single law on millions of individuals, a claim, in its generalization, impossible to substantiate. The generic stock images, then, are an economical means of illustration for categorical statements offered in the absence of verifiable evidence.

An even more cynical appropriation of stock video occurs in *We Have the Power*: *Making America Energy Independent* (Terry Moloney, 2008). The documentary explicitly endorses any and all avenues to expand domestic energy resources and to decrease U.S. dependence on international markets. In practice, the film emphasizes fossil fuel and nuclear power as ideal energy sources, with only passing consideration given to renewable energy like wind or solar power. In one striking sequence, Newt Gingrich, the film's primary narrator, argues that the United States should maximize access to its domestic resources by drilling offshore:



Citizens United documentary, *We Have the Power: Making America Energy Independent*

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Stock-video of "offshore exploration" in *We Have the Power*

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> "With today's advances in technology and environmental regulations, exploration can be conducted along the outer continental shelf in ways that keep the drilling out of sight and protects the environment."

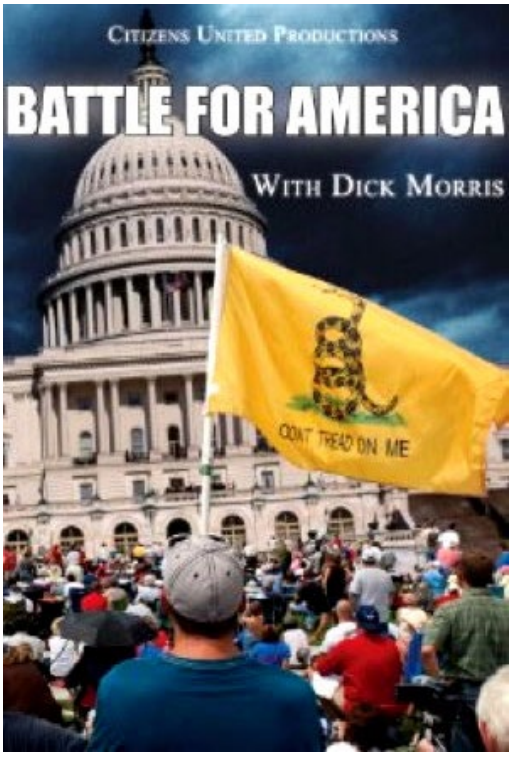
Gingrich uses the term *exploration* as a presumably less offensive synonym for *drilling*. The visual accompaniment to Gingrich's commentary—stock video of scuba divers casually swimming near a reef —seems to confirm the benign, even recreational aspects of "exploration" along the continental shelf. Trading accuracy for affect, the terminological substitution obscures the cost and danger involved in extracting oil from the sea floor.[12] The stock video takes the talking points' rhetorical aim a step further by picturing what the language intends to suggest.

Finally, at least for this present overview of examples, *Battle For America* (2010) blames President Obama for the recessed economy following his election. Commentators in the documentary acknowledge that the United States was already in a deep recession when Obama was elected to office. However, *Battle for America* overlooks entirely Bush administration policies relevant to, if not responsible for, the 2008 financial collapse. Political strategist Dick Morris declares, without evidence or explanation,

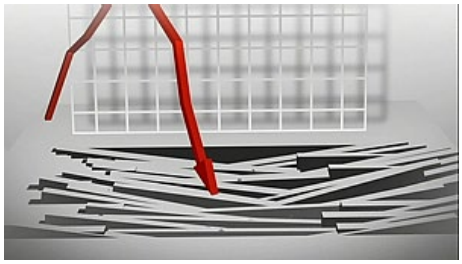
> "[Obama] took a disaster and turned it into a catastrophe, and he ran the country into the ground."

Appearing on-screen at the same time is a stock video clip, which depicts a graph chart with an animated red arrow that plunges so low as to crash through the floor. The animated chart bears no referential relation to economic data but simply reiterates Morris' claim in graphic form.

In each of these examples, the films offer their viewers the formal appearance of political argument but without any corresponding evidence that would ground the arguments in empirical reality. The stock images, instead, provide visual images reminiscent of evidence but which lack an empirical referent. Consider, by contrast, the progressive political diagnosis of income inequality offered by Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor, in the documentary *Inequality for All* (Kornbluth 2013). In the film, Reich refers repeatedly to a graph chart that tracks income inequality in the United States between the respective Wall Street collapses in 1928 and 2008. The chart indicates a rapid rise in income inequality as a precursor to both the Great Depression and Great Recession and thereby grounds Reich's corresponding arguments in favor of higher taxes on the wealthy (among other prescriptions) in historical data. This is not to say the graph substantiates beyond a reasonable doubt Reich's diagnoses of contemporary economic ills. The important point to draw from this admittedly unfair comparison is that Reich's visual evidence begs for further elaboration. Specifically, it necessities a transition from the general representation of nearly a century of economic history (displayed in the chart) to the more particular interpretations (offered by Reich and other interviewees) of what the data means and how it should inform public policy. The graph video chart licensed by *Battle for America* makes no similar distinction because its generic quality makes no claim to historical reality. Its signification remains entirely rhetorical, a visual repetition of Morris' talking point, though its appearance strategically aligns a political claim with a visual corollary in a formal manner similar to other political documentaries.



Citizens United documentary, *Battle for America*.



Stock-video of an animated graph-chart, meant to indicate the failed "Obama economy" in *Battle for America*.



Charting income inequality in *Inequality for All*

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The use of suggestive words and imagery to frame a political issue is nothing new to political discourse, let alone to contemporary conservative media. In the case of *Fox News,* as Jones finds, rhetorical framing and talking-points skew political discussions toward biased ends. *Performative* speech-acts offered by network hosts may introduce entirely new ideas into political discourse that were not otherwise operative in the debate. When the hosts of *Fox & Friends* (1996-present) label a proposed Islamic community center in Manhattan a "Ground Zero Mosque," or when Sarah Palin writes on Facebook that "Obamacare" will include "death panels," such

> "speech acts or utterances don't just report or describe something, but actually bring that thing into being through the act of speaking."[13]

In the same manner, (re)describing offshore drilling as "exploration" or claiming Obama has destroyed the U.S. economy are performative utterances, the presentation of contestable claims as if they were widely-accepted facts.

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Speech-acts on *Fox News* skew political coverage through rhetorical framing and performative speech . . .



. . . while Citizens United documentaries combine talking-points with stock images, such as statements about President Obama's ineptitude paired with stock-video of a shirtless man who fails to dunk a basketball in *Battle for America*.

What Jones rightly identifies as *performative* speech on *Fox News* takes an even more radical form in Citizens United films due to the expressive similarity between words and images, talking points and stock footage. The stock videos exist in a paradigmatic state similar to the paradigm of signifiers available to the speaker of a given language. Indeed, considering their ready accessibility in online databases, the stock video clips share more in common with linguistic modes of expression than with archival or found footage typically found in compilation documentaries (an issue I discuss more below). In *Battle for America,* in addition to the stock animated chart used to illustrate Obama's alleged destruction of the economy, a variety of other stock video clips appear throughout the film to correlate with a predictably negative assessment of the White House and Congressional Democrats in the first two years of the Obama administration. Other stock video clips reiterate generic claims about the Democratic Party's ineptitude, including a heavyset, shirtless man who fails in his attempt to dunk a basketball; a white collar worker (the same actor and set pictured in *Fire from the Heartland*) who knocks down a house of cards just as he attempts to place the final card on top; and, most spectacularly, a computer-generated animated sequence depicting the Earth from space as it explodes.

Each of these video clips, selected from a larger database of available images, offer a similar affective product; each setting or scenario is recognizable as something negative, displeasing, or undesirable. Though lacking the bigotry of more conventional stereotypes, these examples of stock footage, paired as they are with political speech, nevertheless demonstrate a similar mode of paradigmatic generalization, a "cognitive template of prejudice" applied to the process of political reasoning.



Stock-video of a white collar worker failing to complete a house of cards in *Battle for America.*



Stock-video of a white collar worker failing to complete a house of cards in *Battle for America*

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Stock-video of Earth ...



... exploding as a consequence of President Obama's policies in *Battle for America.*

As Roland Barthes discusses in *Elements of Semiology,* speech normally operates according to a syntagmatic ordering of words selected from a broader set of available signifiers. The individual placement of any particular signifier within a sentence functions paradigmatically, such that one signifier could be replaced by many other alternatives. For example, the incomplete sentence, "My favorite thing to eat for dessert is _____", could be completed by the insertion of such signifiers as *chocolate cake*, *vanilla ice cream*, or *cherry pie*; each of these sweet treats, and many others like them, are "members" of the paradigm *dessert,* of signifiers signifying foods regularly consumed at the end of a meal. Certain statements or combinations of words, however, may be repeated so often in a given historical moment that longer *strings* of signifiers come to exist paradigmatically—in such cases, an entire phrase becomes available for selection in a manner usually reserved for individual words. Citing Ferdinand de Saussure, Barthes writes,

> "there is . . . a whole series of sentences which belong to language, and which the individual no longer has to combine himself."[14][open endnotes in new window]

For instance, if a speaker encounters an idiosyncratic American cultural practice, she may describe the practice as being *as American as cherry pie*. To utter the phrase *as American as cherry pie* does not require the speaker to contemplate the ontology of American experience or even to understand the historical significance of cherry pie in regional American cooking. Instead, the referential value of the paradigmatic phrase derives from its repetition. A speaker learns that *as American as cherry pie* may be used to describe a phenomenon deemed to be uniquely American and applies the paradigmatic statement without any necessary consideration of what the statement actually means. Barthes terms this kind of linguistic phenomenon a stereotype. From this semiotic perspective, a stereotype can be more than a biased assumption about a group of people; it can also function as a debased form of speech that privileges efficiency over careful thought, the generic over the contextual. A stereotype outsources critical thought and relieves a speaker from the work of speech; it replaces the active selection of words with a passive reiteration and repetition of the self-similar. Once it exists, a stereotype "belongs to language" in general rather than to specific, contextual, contingent speech acts.

To return to just one of the examples of stock-video in *Battle for America*, we could say that the clip showing a shirtless man who fails to dunk a basketball "belongs to language" in that there are countless ways in which the clip could be applied. In another context, the clip might be used to reiterate the racial stereotype, "white men can't jump"; it could be used as a dig against the athletic limitations of individuals who are mildly overweight; or more philosophically the stock-video could illustrate the existential limitations of mortal beings. In the context of *Battle for America*, the video clip is meant to illustrate *ineptitude*, specifically Obama's incapacity to respond effectively to an economic crisis. Such an application of the stock-video may be one of the more generic significations implicit in the clip, but this is precisely my point. The generic nature of the clips' meaning, like the ahistorical arguments leveled against Obama, do not achieve anything more than a general repetition of negative signifiers.

In the examples drawn from Citizens United, stock images provide evocative images for any conceivable topic or talking point. Moreover, the accompanying images provide visual variety to films otherwise composed entirely of talking-heads. Stock video thereby provides the primary visual content by which the films mimic the appearance of documentary form. With all of the typical features of compilation documentary present in the films—interviews, montages of "archival" footage, occasional narration—Citizens United marshals the formal structure of nonfiction film without any of the attendant ethical imperatives normally

associated with the genre. Again, in the case of *Fox News*,Jones finds comparable examples of generic mimicry:

> "Fox's performances of ideology cannot be separated from their occurrence as news. ... It is the genre of news that offers important and necessary 'cover' for the network, helping to thwart charges of propaganda or partisanship."[15]

Similarly, the visual strategies employed by Citizens United might be less troubling if they did not take the explicit form of documentary. In other words, Citizens United films simulate the appearance of documentary form just as stereotypes mimic the form of thoughtful speech.

Documentary and paradigmatic arguments

Documentary films present arguments about the historical world—this is one of the genre's most distinguishing features. Whereas fiction films offer imaginative scenarios whose references to the real world are only metaphorical, Bill Nichols argues, documentaries present arguments about the world as it was, is, or could be. Due to their often indexical relationship to historical events,

> "documentaries partake of the same order of reality as that to which they refer."[16]

Carl Plantinga also appeals to documentary's argumentative status against "postmodern skeptics" who would claim that nonfiction films have inherent biases that render them untrustworthy as historical documents. Plantinga writes,

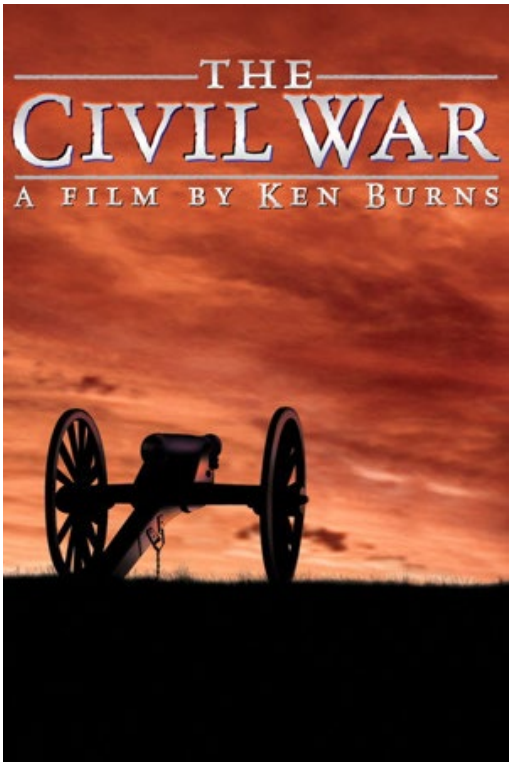
> "Nonfiction film makes no claim to *reproduce* the real, but rather makes claims *about* the 'real,' just as any nonfiction communication does."[17]

Drawing from Plantinga, Paul Ward also describes a documentary's appeal to historical truth as limited by the intersubjective boundaries of any speech act:

> "The only unchanging thing about documentary is that it is a form that makes assertions or truth claims about the real world or real people in that world."[18]

Undoubtedly, Citizens United films use stock footage to illustrate *arguable* positions about the world. However, these arguable positions do not necessarily take the form of *argumentative* expression because the stock images deploy paradigmatic generalities unrestrained by the limitations of historical reference. By this I do not intend to argue with the definitions of documentary offered by Nichols, Plantinga, or Ward, among others. Instead my interest is to demonstrate how Citizens United invokes the generic trademarks of documentary form even while avoiding explicit argumentation in favor of paradigmatic performance.

In an essay that also considers paradigmatic images and their implicit resistance to definitions of documentary form, Dirk Eitzen expresses dissatisfaction with accounts of documentary that emphasize the argumentative features of nonfiction film over other modes of address. Eitzen develops his critique with reference to a sequence from the first episode of Ken Burn's *The Civil War* (1991), one that epitomizes Burn's documentary aesthetic.[19] The scene in question, the final one from the episode, begins with a long quote from a letter a soldier wrote to his wife prior to dying in battle, narrated in voice-over; archival images of soldiers and their wives appear on-screen, followed finally by present-day images of Civil War canons.



Ken Burns' documentary, *The Civil War*

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Paradigmatic images of soldiers and their wives generalize the particular story of one soldier's letter home in *The Civil War*.



An image of Civil War era canons likewise function as paradigmatic illustrations indicative of the historical battles in *The Civil War*.

For Eitzen, the combination of historical material with other illustrative representations, both archival and staged, has a melodramatic appeal to audiences rather than an argumentative one. Eitzen explains Burns' non-argumentative aesthetic by invoking a semiotic vocabulary in a fashion similar to my discussion thus far of Citizens United:

> "One might say that instead of stressing the syntagmatic connections between elements—the horizontal links: sequence, logic, cause and effect, and so forth—this scene emphasizes the paradigmatic dimension, piling meaning upon meaning to create a kind of emotional depth."[20]

For Eitzen, the sequence in *The Civil War* offers no explicit argument, at least not as documentary scholars define the term. The intersection of interrelated texts, sounds, and images suggests the depiction of something *truthful*—say, about the impact of war on familial relationships—but the sequence is melodramatically evocative rather than argumentative. Archival images of soldiers and their wives offer generic illustration for the more specific events referenced in the narrated letter, thereby providing viewers with some small insight into both an individual story (a single soldier writing to his wife) and a broader category of experience (the impact of war on families). Since the sequence draws no explicit distinctions between the specific historical references and the more general, or generic, illustrations, Burns thereby maximizes the affective intersection of the general with the particular.

The paradigmatic, stock images that appear in the examples cited from Citizens United likewise avoid the explicit appearance of argumentation. In contrast to the melodramatic purposes of a filmmaker like Burns, however, the quasi-arguments of Citizens United serve a more cynical purpose. Political speakers like Bachmann, Gingrich, and Morris, offer debatable accounts of health care legislation, energy policy, and economic history, but the speakers' performative utterances assume what they might otherwise be compelled to demonstrate through evidence, explanation, or argument. The stock images, rather than offering confirmation for their statements function as visual synonyms for the performative talking points. If the sequences attempt to offer convincing accounts of their subject matter, then their effectiveness derives from the seamlessness by which the visual world accords with the verbal, or to borrow and revise Nichols's definitions of documentary, the talking points and stock-video partake of the same order of *generic* reality as that to which they refer.

The effectiveness of conservative political rhetoric is often attributed to what Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella term the "echo chamber."[21] Conservative websites, talk-radio, and cable-news work together to create a cross-media system where even the most specious ideas gain traction, not by virtue of their logic, evidence, or historical accuracy, but simply because the same ideas repeat across seemingly independent outlets. In the echo chamber, circulation and repetition give talking-points the semblance of reliability. Moreover, the echo chamber proves profitable for corporations who derive advertising revenue from

the niche marketing targeted at self-selecting political audiences. In the case of Citizens United, we encounter a more immediate, self-enclosed feedback loop, a case of circulation and repetition that occurs at the level of style. Stock images combine with political talking points, creating an audio-visual union specifically tailored to a given topic but still generic enough to avoid the possibility of counterfactual rebuttal. Additionally, the political ideology of neo-liberalism, enamored as it is with the free-market, finds an aesthetic correlative in the films' reliance on databases of stock footage to generate the majority of its visual content, that is, on visual commodities produced to maximize their potential exchange value by blurring the boundary between the general and the particular. The examples drawn from *Fire from the Heartland, We Have the Power,* and *Battle for America* undoubtedly represent some of the more egregious examples of stock footage use in the Citizens United library of films. In other cases, Citizens United films do offer explicit arguments and rely on historical newsreels or archival footage. However, even in these examples, the films produce similar cognitive shortcuts by refusing to make distinctions between historical newsreels and stock footage, as if all images, regardless of their origin or manner of production, entailed the same evidentiary status.

Compilation and found footage

There is nothing especially suspicious or even unusual about the appropriation of archival, found, or stock footage in documentary film. As Jay Leyda recounts in *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film*, early filmmakers frequently employed compilation strategies for the purposes of both fiction and non-fiction alike. Among numerous examples, Leyda reminds us that Edwin Porter's *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903) appropriated stock footage of fire brigades from the nascent Edison archive, to which Porter added a fictional depiction of a mother and child in danger from a domestic fire, thereby producing a coherent narrative structure.[22]

Staged footage in *The Life of an American Fireman* . . . **[MISSING IMAGE]**

As newsreel archives ballooned in size following the First World War, filmmakers gained greater access to stock footage that could be refashioned to illustrate contemporary events, and it was typical for editors to appropriate images without clarifying their historical origins for audiences. For Leyda, such compilations were made possible by the dual nature of newsreel footage. Newsreels are composed both of indexical representations of historical events and formal visual features whose qualities may afford alternative uses. He writes,

> "Beyond its [historical] information, each piece of newsreel has a formal content, unremarked though visible."

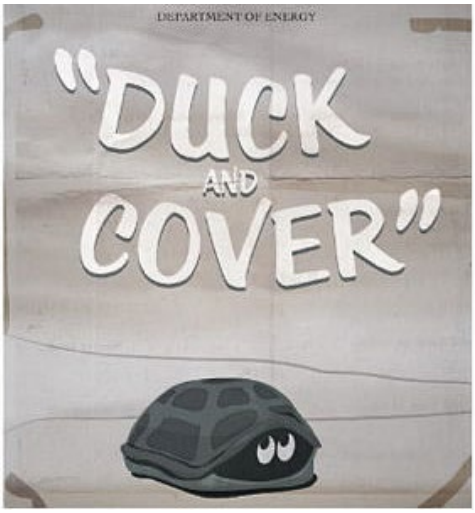
. . . paired with documentary footage of actual fire brigades.**[MISSING IMAGE]**

These formal elements include

> "areas of black, white, and greys that make up the shapes of people and places, the distribution of these areas into compositions (accidental or otherwise), the movement of the people and objects shown, the direction of this movement, and the rhythm of movement, an element possibly quite distinct from the graphic rhythm of the composition."[23]

A particular newsreel may contain historical content—reference to specific times, places, and events—wholly different from the purposes of the newsreel's later use. Indeed, the formal elements of color or shade, scale or size, movement or composition, make the same found footage eminently useful for alternative purposes.[24]

Apart from the relatively uncontroversial cases of archival substitution considered



The animated "duck and cover," Cold War film produced by the U.S. Government, appropriated as archival footage for the purpose of ideological critique in *The Atomic Café*.

by Leyda, filmmakers may also appropriate archival footage for more politically didactic ends. In such cases, the reappearance of archival materials in different contexts may provide an effective means for an audience's historical enlightenment. As Jamie Baron writes in *The Archive Effect,*

> "The recontextualization of the found document, creates the opportunity for multiple readings of that document."[25]

The possibility for multiple readings may arise directly from a director's purposeful intervention, Baron notes, as in the case of Michael Moore's appropriation of found footage for satirical effect, particularly in his early films *Roger and Me* (1989) and *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). Baron also cites the temporal difference between a film's original context and later reappearances as key feature of its revelatory power. In *The Atomic Café* (Pierce Rafferty, Jayne Loader, Kevin Rafferty, 1982), for instance, Cold War propaganda films provoke an epistemological self-consciousness on the part of audiences when viewed in a context different from their original distribution. The "famous 'duck and cover' educational films that taught children how to duck down and cover their heads with their hands in case of an atomic blast" will appear to contemporary audiences, "with our own extratextual knowledge of radiation, blatantly absurd."[26]

Catherine Russell makes a similar point in her own discussion of *The Atomic Café* —the "historical gap" between the government propaganda films at the moment of their production, in contrast to the presumably more enlightened present, creates a temporal rift by which audiences may discover a "fantasy America" during the Cold War in which propaganda "produced a simulated version of [the United States] to offset the fear of death."[27] Whether in the poorly-acted propaganda films that appear throughout *The Atomic Café* or the megalomaniacal ramblings of Senator Joseph McCarthy displayed in the Emile de Antonio compilation film *Point of Order* (1964), found footage may function as an antidote to ideological bias, highlighting previously normative prejudices that from our historical vantage point now appear contingent and constructed.

These accounts of found footage affirm that the image has a certain independence. The particular shapes or colors, events or ideas originally captured or intended in what are later rediscovered and termed *archival* materials do not circumscribe the potential future uses that a given image may eventually serve. A simple but significant distinction exists between the stock video as used in Citizens United and more traditional uses of found footage in compilation documentaries: stock footage is produced with the explicit intention that the images will be used for a variety of different purposes. A stock image economizes on the inherent polysemy of signification and interpretation, and stock photographers take this polysemy into account to inform the production process. As Paul Frosh notes in his book-length study of the stock photo industry, *The Image Factory*, a stock image or





A single stock-photo model can suggest a variety of different career "types" with the simple change in costume.



A lonely New Year's Eve celebration . . .



. . . becomes a birthday party, though the set remains the same.

video sequence must be general enough in its connotations that it may express ideas or emotions applicable to multiple contexts but not so general that it loses its affective force. [28] A stock photo, Frosh writes,

> "offers up an ensemble of possible references to pre-formed systems of cultural meaning, yet since . . . it is produced with no final purpose or addressee in mind . . . it proposes no definite destination but only multiple trajectories."[29]

Any archival image remains susceptible to appropriation, of course, but stock footage embraces appropriation *in advance* of its production, aspiring to acquire a paradigmatic status for as many prospective users as are willing to pay a licensing fee. The economic imperative welcomes reduplication as the necessary ground for its profit motive. Stock footage cannot be taken out of context precisely because stock images are produced to fit flexibly into whatever context in which they variously appear.

In the fields of advertising or publishing, the licensing of a stock photo or video may be entirely innocuous: if the situation is such that a generic image will suffice, then economics may dictate that the cost of licensing an image is preferable to producing one from scratch. The same economic imperative holds for the production of the stock photos themselves, such as when the same model or actor appears in a variety of different costumes to exemplify a variety of paradigmatic vocations. This very phenomenon of "re-using" a single actor (or setting) to illustrate a variety of different paradigmatic meanings can be found in *Fire from the Heartland*. As I already mentioned, a stock-video sequence in *Fire From the Heartland* depicts a young man celebrating New Year's Eve by himself, an image here meant to align with Michele Bachman's claim that Obama's plans for universal health care will produce a generation of immature individuals. Moments later in *Fire From the Heartland*, another stock-video sequence appears (licensed from the same stock-video production company), revealing the same set and male actor, with the addition of a woman (presumably in the role of girlfriend) and a birthday cake. The set remains similarly decorated as in the scene of a lonely New Year's Eve, but the additions—a woman and a cake—transform the scene's meaning to indicate a birthday celebration. With minor changes, the stock-video scene is economized to produce a wide variety of potential meanings and thereby the widest potential for licensing opportunities—one set, at least two possible stock representations, and an almost innumerable number of possible applications. In the case of political rhetoric as we find it in Citizens United, however, the same *economizing of the image* demonstrates a more troubling effect. Radical statements and claims, which would seem to demand rigorous evidence, instead appear in confluence with images conveniently licensed for their connotative effects.

Jodi Dean reminds us of (what should be) a key difference between consumer marketing and political campaigns. Advertising appeals to individual, idiosyncratic preferences and desires; and audiences are unlikely to judge a marketing campaign according to how accurately it reflects the world. Politics, by contrast, concerns the "terrain upon which claims to universality are raised and defended" and should stretch citizens

> "to think beyond themselves as specific individuals with preferences and interests and consider what is best for anyone."[30]

The advertising logic employed by Citizens United, then, displays a perverse irony: images produced to suggest "an ensemble of possible references" with "no final purpose . . . but only multiple trajectories" nevertheless serve as visual accompaniments to moralistic pronouncements of supposed truth. The flexibility of stock, in other words, gives generic ground the inflexible mantra of conservative discourse.

The examples of stock video in *Fire From the Heartland, We Have the Power,* and *Battle for America* constitute admittedly egregious cases in the Citizens United collection. Stock images provide visual feedback for rhetorical talking points but offer no substantiating evidence or historical context for the political claims found there. On the occasions when Citizens United films offer substantive arguments grounded in historical research, they tend to apply the same *stock logic* to any image regardless of its origin or the manner of its production. Newsreels, found footage, and archival images are used interchangeably with stock film and video to develop broad historical narratives conducive to partisan arguments. The images drawn from paradigmatic archives and rendered in the manner of stock footage serve as illustrations for equally generic moralistic assumptions.

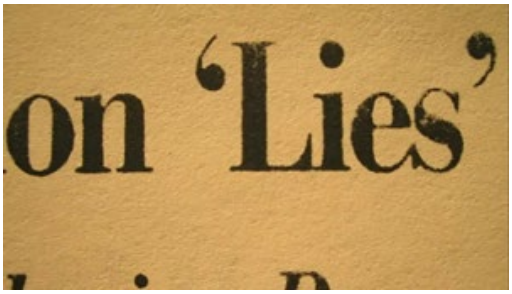
In the examples discussed thus far, I have generally treated as irrelevant the truth-value of any ideas expressed in Citizens United films. The relative merits of the Affordable Health Care Act, the costs and benefits of offshore drilling, the impact of governmental policy on economic recovery, and the systemic causes of global financial collapse—these are serious topics deserving of serious consideration. As far as Citizens United films are concerned, however, any political issue, no matter how complex, boils down to a simple choice: either redemption will be found in the neo-conservative affirmation of "traditional values" and a neo-liberal embrace of the "free market," or we will face the apocalyptic demise of U.S. exceptionalism at the hands of racial and sexual minorities and as a result of the federal government's overreach. If such ideological biases produce moralistic simplification of complex issues, then the aesthetic rendering of these biases in the visual form of stock footage (or historical newsreels treated as no different from stock footage) suggests a different problem concerning political misrepresentation. The ideological biases operative in the films, more than simply framing "evidence" to the benefit of a predetermined ideological perspective, treat political representation as a purely formal endeavor. Rather than correlating arguments with evidence, Citizens United films construct only an affective exchange between word and image, talking points and stock footage. Apart from the biased ends these visual sequences serve to promote, the films appropriate the very styles and structures of documentary in service of evocative paradigmatic sequences, mimicking the formal appearance of documentary arguments. Citizens United films accordingly display a perverse pedagogy. As a collection, the films model for their viewers debased forms of critical thinking, journalistic research, scientific expertise, historiography, and, most important for our purpose, documentary form.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA







Cropped newspaper headlines in *Hillary: The Movie*.

Stock archives and the reproduction of documentary form

In the examples drawn from Citizens United films thus far, political speech in both word and image goes to almost any lengths to validate neo-liberal economics and neo-conservative values. I say *almost* because each of the examples mimics the appearance of documentary form and thereby remain minimally limited by the expectations associated with the genre. In the most egregious parings of talking points with stock video footage (*Fire from the Heartland*, *We Have the Power*, and *Battle for America*), the reliance on stereotypical language and paradigmatic images privileges economical expression over argumentation. The stock images do not provide evidence for their accompanying talking points, but the correlation of words and images, at the very least, constructs complete audio-visual sequences reminiscent of (compilation) documentary form. Economically rendered stereotypes substitute for documentary arguments, and paradigmatic images rendered through moralistic teleologies masquerade as serious historiography.

Hillary: The Movie stands as the most complex (and troubling) documentary in the Citizens United library by offering definitive arguments grounded in references to historical events but which nevertheless deploy an overriding *stock logic*. That is to say, *Hillary* demonstrates a significant effort to compile evidence in support of its critique of Clinton, especially to validate the various conspiracy theories voiced by its participants concerning Clinton's time served as First Lady in the 1990s. Nevertheless, *evidence*, as it appears in *Hillary*, derives not from investigation into anything that would remotely qualify as empirical reality but rather from archival materials and personal observations rendered in paradigmatic form.

Hillary begins with a sequence of close-up shots of numerous newspaper headlines, each one recounting a controversial moment from Clinton's past. The newspaper clippings echo similarly negative remarks made by an assorted cast of longtime Clinton critics who appear intermittently on-screen, initiating an unrelenting attack on Clinton's character that continues throughout the film. A formal alignment emerges between *ad hominem* attacks voiced in interviews and a complement of newspaper clippings that shuttle and flicker across the screen. Interviewees are prompted to describe Clinton in a few words. Author and pundit Ann Coulter calls Clinton "mendacious, venal, sneaky;" former Clinton advisor Dick Morris terms the candidate "ideological" and "intolerant;" Mark Levin, a talk-radio host, says, "she scares the hell out of me;" and Coulter appears again, sarcastically this time: "She looks good in a pants suit." Appearing in tandem with these comments are an assortment of negative newspaper headlines about Clinton, fluttering on-screen in rapid succession to produce a catalogue of negative terms and phrases that mirror those offered by Coulter, Morris, and Levin. Already brief headlines are framed so as to reveal only a word or two at a time, effectively echoing the negative series of adjectives voiced in the interviews. Extreme close-ups reveal yellowed paper, sometimes faded type, and an assortment of suggestive portions of headlines and bylines: "lies," "veracity," and "perjury," among many others. The extreme close-ups on the headlines obscure their original context, avoid thorough consideration of the actual reportage that

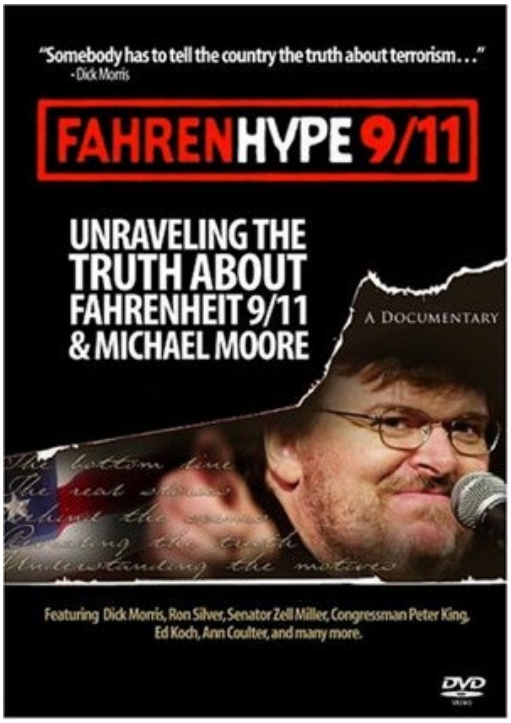


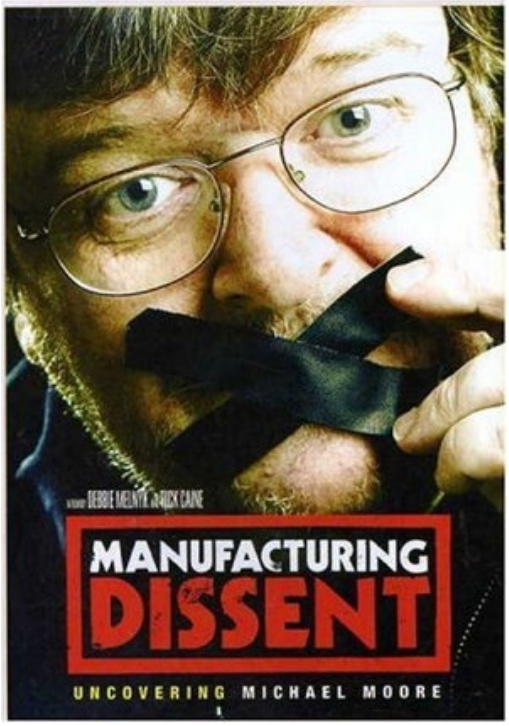
each headline announces, and thereby discount the journalistic objectivity that an audience might otherwise attribute to them. In other words, the clippings align too perfectly with the partisan rhetoric expressed in the interviews and thereby forfeit their value as historical referents.

Following the opening sequence of stock headline clippings and developing a broader overview of controversies during Clinton's time as First Lady, *Hillary* emphasizes the scope and range of allegations against her. These controversies include Clinton's alleged involvement in the firing of long-time White House travel office employees to make room for allies from the presidential campaign ("Travelgate"); her radical, failed attempt to reform health care; suggestion by several witnesses that Clinton threatened a woman to squelch claims of sexual assault on the part of President Clinton; and assertions that she convinced her husband to pardon a group of convicted terrorists so as to gain electoral support in New York state as she ran for the U.S. Senate. In the various sequences that cover these controversies and claims, the film offers no substantiating evidence for the allegations. Instead, *Hillary* relies primarily on the confident assertions of its witnesses and interviewees, paired with near-constant montages of negative newspaper headlines. The film thus operates according to the logic of guilt-by-accumulation.

The headline images reiterate the comments made in interviews much like the stock-video clips that reiterate political talking points in *Fire From the Heartland*, *We Have the Power*, and *Battle for America*, though here the images carry the added weight of the journalistic archive. Close examination, however, reveals that the seemingly endless collection of newspaper clippings is not quite as extensive as it appears at first glance. Many of the same headlines reappear, though the speed of their appearance masks their repetition. The headlines thereby function like a formal transition, similar to templates for optical transitions (i.e., wipes, dissolves) typically found in non-linear video editing platforms. In this case, the content behind the form derives from the journalistic archive. What would in another scenario function as a merely transitional device here constitutes a breakdown of form and content, paradigm and syntagm.[31] [open endnotes in new window]

The connective tissue that binds the documentary together is not historical research but the *image* of historical research. That is to say, the headlines suggest a reservoir of data or information available to further support the allegations made by its interviewees. The fact that the film never explores the details of the journalistic record does not prevent the appearance of such archival markers from





Anti-Michael Moore documentaries.

serving their purpose as paradigmatic images indicative of the film's eponymous villain and her seemingly controversial past. It is entirely possible that any one, if not all, of the allegations offered against Clinton in *Hillary* may be true. Clinton may have orchestrated the travel-office firing in order to reward political allies with jobs in the White House; she may have hired a thug to threaten Katherine Wiley, we learn, preventing Wiley from testifying against President Clinton for alleged sexual harassment. Nevertheless, even as *Hillary* goes to great lengths to catalogue a list of individuals victimized in Clinton's quest for power, it makes no similar effort to confirm the allegations. In other words, *Hillary* demonstrates a driving interest in the affective byproduct of an overwhelming quantity of allegations and in organizing the allegations in a formally coherent spectacle that maintains the appearance of documentary form. The actual truth-value of any specific claim seems almost irrelevant by comparison to the coherent formal arrangement of these claims.

Mark Andrejevic locates a similar logic operative in the contemporary peddling of conspiracy theories online. In *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know,* Andrejevic identifies the defining features of conspiracy theories:

> "non-debunkability (non-falsifiability); the displacement of accounts of system or structural forms of conflict with tales of deliberate machinations ...; and, finally, a populist tendency to 'other' the alleged conspirators."[32]

Andrejevic admits that a conspiracy theory should not be dismissed simply because it presumes to uncover hidden networks of power—many conspiracy theories, so called, have turned out to be true. Instead, Andrejevic is concerned with a particular case of pathological paranoia, one that is immune to any possible rebuttal, as in the case of "birthers" who, even when confronted with Barack Obama's long-form birth certificate, confirming his legal status as a U.S. citizen, nevertheless treat such evidence as merely a further case of conspiratorial deception.[33] In such circumstances, the conspiracy theorist demonstrates an affective investment in the consistency that the conspiracy theory provides for her ideological commitments irrespective of the so-called evidences in support of the theory. "A conspiracy theory can turn out to be true without absolving it of what might be described as the pathology of conspiracy," Andrejevic writes.

> "The fact that conspiracy theorists might have arrived, somehow, at the truth does not undo the ways in which their forms of theorizing reject – in spirit, if not in form – the evidence-based deliberation and standards of argumentation that might, in some cases, end up legitimating their claims."[34]

Such "evidence-based deliberation and standards of argumentation" are not completely absent from *Hillary*; however, the arguments and accompanying evidences fail to offer a convincing indictment of Clinton because they never descend from their paradigmatic suggestiveness. Like the pathology of conspiracy

described by Andrejevic, *Hillary* invests more affective weight in the display of argumentative form(s) than in the collection of empirically relevant content.

One final example from *Hillary* is worth consideration for its excessive emphasis on what amounts to a *stock image* of evidence, despite the fact that the image in question seems indexical in the strictest sense of the term. Peter F. Paul appears in interviews in *Hillary* and alleges that Clinton knowingly and purposefully misrepresented campaign budgets during her run for the U.S. Senate. In the final months of Bill Clinton's presidency, we learn, Paul organized a star-studded fundraising event in Hollywood in the President's honor; the money generated by the gala would go to support Hillary's campaign for Senate. The event led to a relatively minor controversy, reported by newspapers at the time, in which the FEC fined Clinton's campaign $35,000 for underreporting the costs for the event. Against Clinton's claimed ignorance of an unintentional accounting era, Paul asserts that Clinton knowingly and purposefully broke the law.

Paul functions as a problematic witness for *Hillary*. Given his own checkered past, including criminal convictions for drug use and securities violations, Paul's association with the Clintons paints a picture of the power-couple as willing to work with any unsavory character in their quests for electoral victories. Paul's troubled biography also marks him as a potentially unreliable witness. In a seeming attempt by the filmmaker to bolster the allegations against Clinton, Paul appears on-screen strapped to a polygraph machine. What follows are a series of questions and responses that confirm only the professional relationship between Paul and Clinton—a fact never in dispute and entirely separate from Paul's allegations about Clinton's campaign finance misdeeds. The examiner asks, "Did you discuss with Hillary Clinton supporting her campaign in exchange for President Clinton helping you in your business concerns?" and "Did Hillary Clinton pledge President Clinton's support for your business interests?"

Paul's affirmative responses to the questions remain entirely irrelevant to his allegations that Clinton committed crimes. Close-up shots of the digital polygraph (like the headline clippings) suggest an aura of historical verifiability, but this semblance of facticity is only an image of truthfulness, effectively a stock image indicative of a truthful answer but which remains irrelevant as evidence for the purported claims against Clinton.



Peter Paul answers questions while strapped to a lie detector in *Hillary: The Movie*.

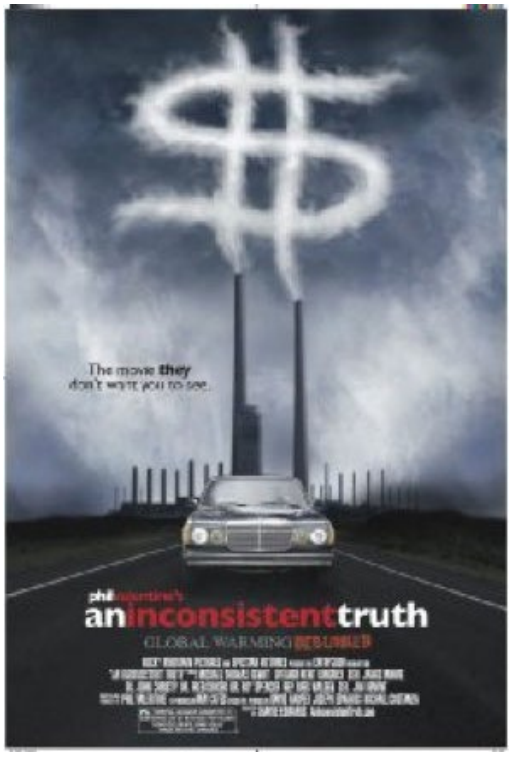


The lie detector images the "stock" truthfulness of Paul's answers.

The data-image functions not as a verification of truth but rather as an ostensible picture *of* truth, a stock image meant to signify the filmmaker's assurance that what Paul tells us has been scientifically adjudicated. The polygraph image functions as *stock*, moreover, because the irrelevance of the questions and answers contradicts the image's supposed status as evidence. The polygraph image functions as a *virtual or stock image* of verifiability, but nothing more.

Any licensed stock image of a polygraph display would accomplish the same

affective end as the one we see here, at least if we pay attention to the specific questions and answers the precede it. Indeed, we could say that the polygraph picture reiterates in a pointed and precise manner *Hillary*'s overarching rhetorical strategy: the collection of materials and images seemingly drawn from a verifiable historical record that instead signify a series of paradigmatic abstractions about Clinton (liar, cheater, criminal, etc.). The images themselves are neither illustrations nor confirmations of personal testimony. Instead, they are generic pictures, emblems of a speaker's trustworthiness (Paul) or signposts suggesting a uniformly partisan perspective of the past (newspaper headlines). What makes *Hillary* biased, then, is not that it misrepresents the facts. The film's bias, seen repeatedly in its stylistic representations of historical imagery, results from its outright refusal to engage with history as anything other than a spectacular collection of paradigmatic (rather than empirical) evidence to thereby simulate documentary form.





Conclusion

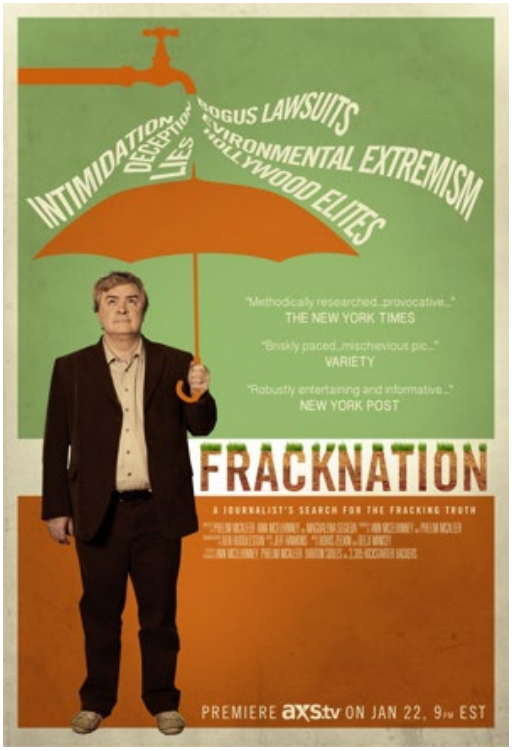
Bias is a term typically used to describe a failed intersection of ideology and epistemology. When bias is operative, prejudicial assumptions skew an account of the empirical world. For example, in the case of campaign finance, unlimited contributions made by corporations to political campaigns imply the direct risk that a politician, once elected, will favor the interests of wealthy donors over other constituents. In such cases, the presumption of bias appears to function according to a linear, causal path—money buys influence—even if the participants involved in the exchange disavow such a clear link between campaign finance and political favors. In other cases, bias may take the form of psychological filtering, say, when an individual displays an unconscious characteristic to protect against unwanted encounters with aspects of the world that contradict deeply held assumptions. As Walter Lippman notes in his classic text, *Public Opinion,* stereotypes are a form of bias that establish nearly impenetrable defenses against the agitation aroused by ideas or experiences that would otherwise complicate our understanding of the world as we believe it to be.[35] A key benefit of bias, understood in this way, appears to be *conservation*: maintaining the status quo in the face of possible contradiction. Richard Hofstadter describes political paranoia in similarly defensive terms, as having "the quality of a defensive act" that protects against "considerations that do not fortify [the paranoiac's] ideas."[36]

From this perspective, the examples drawn from Citizens United demonstrate an overriding defensiveness or formal conservativeness. The films argue against policies and politicians that are contrary to their political ideological paradigm and do not offer positive alternatives for viewers apart from the affective spectacle derived from formalizing their contrary positions. *Fire from the Heartland* predicts unexpected consequences of the Affordable Care Act as one reason for its rejection while offering no alternative solutions to the country's systemic health care problems; *We Have the Power* lauds the safety of offshore drilling, implicitly arguing for the continued use of fossil fuels against alternative energy sources; *Battle for America* and *Generation Zero* place blame for the 2008 financial collapse on President Obama and baby-boomers respectively, avoiding any possible indictment of neo-conservative economic theories (particularly the deregulation of financial markets) put in place by Ronald Reagan and continuing through the presidency of George W. Bush. Even in the case of *Hillary: The Movie*, the film offers no new information concerning its eponymous subject, at least not for any viewers already familiar with what Clinton herself has termed the "vast right-wing conspiracies" peddled on conservative media outlets ever since she and her husband entered the national spotlight.

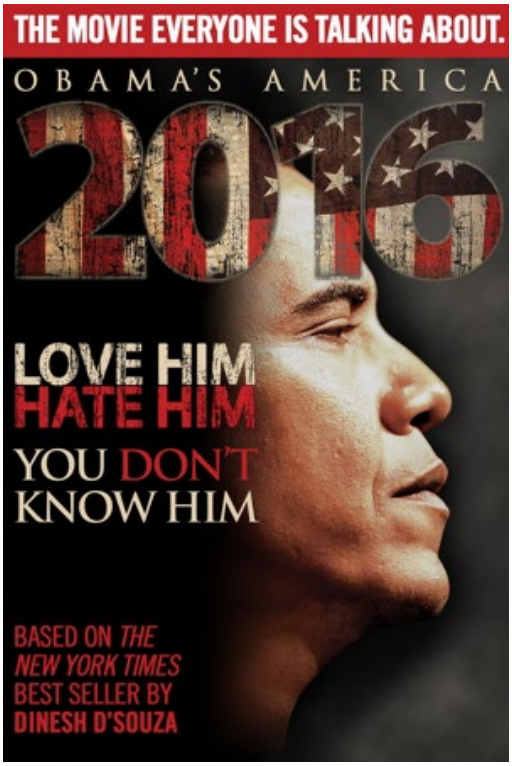
Yet, apart from the defensive ends that the political performances appear to serve,

Anti-Al Gore documentaries

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Anti-anti fracking documentary.



the *stock style* of Citizens United films departs from earlier instantiations of conservative political discourse in one important way. The films maintain the semblance of argument or political debate in their obvious attempts to mimic documentary form, while the emphasis on stereotypes, paradigmatic images, and stock footage avoids any significant engagement with the empirical world. By contrast, the "paranoid style in American politics," as Hofstadter diagnosed it in the mid 20th-century, revels in the accumulation of detailed information in service of its conspiracy theories:

> "The plausibility the paranoid style has for those who find it plausible lies, in good measure, in [the] appearance of the most careful, conscientious, and seemingly coherent application to detail, the laborious accumulation of what can be taken as convincing evidence for the most fantastic conclusions, the careful preparation for the big leap from the undeniable to the unbelievable."

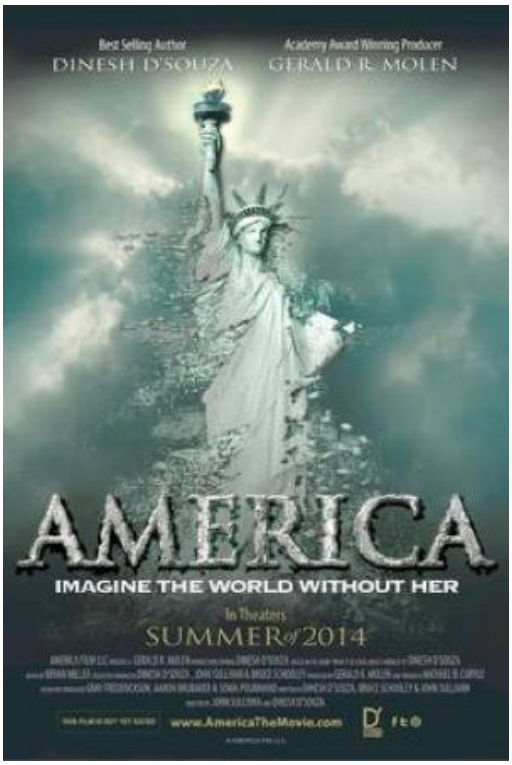
Paranoid political discourse, Hofstadter argues, lacks neither information nor evidence but rather *sensible judgment*—a capacity to determine whether the evidence, no matter its quantity, plausibly suggests a particular conclusion. The *care* demonstrated by Citizens United films is different from the paranoid style identified by Hofstadter because it appears solely through the films' simulation of documentary form, not in the accumulation of information.

The *stock logic* deployed by Citizens United films by no means epitomizes the entirety of contemporary conservative political discourse. Paranoid conspiracy theories, which emphasize the accumulation of evidence instead of the deployment of stock imagery, proliferate online. Melodramatic discourse, particularly the moralistic binary of good vs. evil employed to justify the "war on terror" following 9/11, has also proven a particularly effective means to validate the pro-active, rather than defensive, deployment of military force around the globe.[37] Despite the tendency of conservative political speakers to rely on simplistic moral binaries, Citizens United films demonstrate, I have argued, a radicalized version of this trope, specifically through the blurred generic boundaries between the logics of advertising, documentary form, and political expression.

Indeed, Citizens United stands as just one participant within a growing "cottage industry" of conservative political documentary. Following Michael Moore's rise to prominence as a progressive documentary director, several conservative "rebuttal" documentaries appeared in the mid-2000s, including *Michael & Me* (Elder 2004), *FarhenHype 9/11* (Peterson 2004), *Celsius 41.11* (Knoblock 2004), *Michael Moore Hates America* (Wilson 2004), and *Manufacturing Dissent* (Caine & Melnyk 2007).[38] Similar to the anti-Michael Moore documentaries, many contemporary conservative documentary films present their arguments as responses or rebuttals to progressive political figures or "liberal" filmmakers. In response to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim 2006), films such as *An Inconsistent Truth* (Edwards 2012) and *Blue* (King 2014) were released with the explicit purpose to counter Gore's claims and deny the existence climate change. The pro-hydraulic fracturing film, *FrackNation* (McElhinney and McAleer 2013), claims to rebut the claims made in the anti-fracking film *Gasland* (Fox 2010). Conservative commentator, Dinesh D'Souza, co-directed (with John Sullivan) *2016*: *Obama's America* (2012) and *America: Imagine the World Without Her* (2014), which critique the "anti-colonial" policies of President Obama and the "anti-American" interpretation of history found in Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United* States, respectively.

Finally, in addition to influencing public opinion or serving as an outlet for Republican candidates during electoral campaigns, conservative media has

Anti-Obama documentary.



Anti-Howard Zinn documentary.

increasingly demonstrated a capacity to affect governmental policy. To cite just a few examples:

- Self-proclaimed conservative activist James O'Keefe shot and selectively edited "undercover" videos of ACORN (Association of Community Organizes for Reform Now) employees appearing to engage in illegal activities. The videos were heavily edited and misleading, but Congress eventually discontinued federal funding for ACORN.[39]
- In 2009, Glenn Beck used the platform of his (short-lived) *Fox News* program to attack Van Jones, a progressive activist appointed by the Obama administration as Special Advisor for Green Jobs, Enterprise, and Innovation. Beck spent weeks attacking Jones' character and his so-called radical past, and Jones was eventually forced to resign his position.[40]
- *Fox News,* conservative talk-radio, and media outlets like *The Drudge Report* likewise played critical roles in the promotion of the Tea Party (and the subsequent election of "Tea Party" Republicans to the House of Representatives in the 2010 mid-term elections), to the extent that conservative commentators and "journalists" did not simply cover Tea Party protests, but actually served as effective masters of ceremonies.[41]

In these and numerous other examples there is no significant divide between the opinions offered through conservative media outlets and the actions taken by many elected Republican officials. Just as the perverse deployment of stock images in Citizens United calls attention to certain genre-bending strategies of conservative documentary, semiotic analysis such as I have offered here may further elucidate the formal dissolution of boundaries between political media, partisan rhetoric, and day-to-day governance.

Go to Notes page

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Notes

1. Randall P. Bezanson, *Too Much Free Speech?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 7-10. [return to text]

2. Jeffrey P. Jones, "Fox & Friends' Fear Factor: Performing Ideology in Morning Talk," in *How to Watch Tele- vision: Media Criticism in Practice*, eds. Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 189.

3. Jeffrey P. Jones, "Fox News and the Performance of Ideology," *Cinema Journal* 51.4 (Summer 2012): 179.

4. See Eric Boehlert, "You can't teach an old attack dog new tricks." *Salon.com* (July 20, 2004).

5. Fred Slocum and Yueh-Ting Lee, "Race, Racial Stereotypes, and American Politics" in *The Psychology of Prejudice and Discrmination* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 22.

6. Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card: Campaign Strategy, Implict Messages, and the Norm of Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 9.

7. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 296.

8. Ibid.

9. Schweinitz, Jörg, *Film and Stereotype: A Challenge for Cinema and Theory*, trans. Laura Schleussner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 28.

10. David Horowitz is a conservative author and talk-radio host. He makes regular appearances in conservative documentaries, where his criticism of leftists, socialists, and so-called "Marxist academics" is supposed to gain its authority from his own activity as a New Leftist in the 1960s prior to his rejection of leftism and conversion to conservative political ideology.

11. Some of the stock image houses and web resources used by Citizens United films include Streamline Films (http://www.streamlinefilms.com), Wazee Digital (http://www.wazeedigital.com), and Pond 5 (https://www.pond5.com/sound-effects/).

12. Republican consultant and pollster, Frank Luntz, takes credit for the rhetorical substitution of exploration for drilling in contemporary conservative talking-points in *Words that Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (New York: Hyperion, 2007), 285.

13. Jones (2013), 188. See also Jones' discussion of Sarah Palin in Jeffrey P. Jones, "Parody, Performativity, and Play" in *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, eds. John Hartley, Jean Burgess, and Axel Bruns (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.), 396-406.

14. Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 19. [return to text]

Jones (2012), 179.

16. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), 28.

17. Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 38.

18. Paul Ward, *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), [find page number].

19. Dirk Eitzen, "When is a Documentary?: Documentary as a Mode of Reception" *Cinema Journal* 35.1 (Autumn 1995): 87.

20. Ibid.

21. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

22. Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 14-15.

23. Ibid., 22.

24. As I have already noted and will continue to discuss, producers (or aggregators) of stock footage maximize profits by licensing images that may be used for a wide variety of applications. The same holds true for the appropriation of archival and found footage. Television footage of the planes crashing into the World Trade Towers on 9/11 is just one telling example. On *Fox News* throughout the "War on Terror," recourse to images of the Towers served as melodramatic justification for George W. Bush's aggressive foreign policy. By contrast, in Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), similar footage is used in a montage meant to represent 9/11 as the culminating example of blowback for U.S. involvement in various covert operations during the 20th, including the training and support of Osama Bin Laden in fighting against the Soviets in Afghanistan. In just these two instances, the same footage serves as illustration for two completely opposed political positions, not to mention two fundamentally different accounts of recent historical events.

25. Jamie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 39.

26. Ibid.

27. Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 255.

28. Paul Frosh, *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry* (New York: Berg, 2003), 72.

29. Ibid., 74.

30. Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neo-Liberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 22.

31. Christian Metz discusses the use of optical transitions in narrative cinema with

related semiotic terms, but he treats optical transitions, like lap-dissolves, as *syntagmic* procedures. My analysis treats such visible transitions as *paradigmatic* because the appropriation of actual headlines for the purposes of formal transition appropriates historical content and then deploys them in the mode of a formal transition. Metz, Christian. *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*,trans. Celia Britton, Anwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, and Alfred Guzzetti(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 193-94. [return to text]

32. Mark Andrejevic, *Infoglut: How Too Much Information Is Changing the Way We Think and Know* (New York: Routledge), 118.

33. See also Micahel Barkun's discussion of birther and other conspiracies that proliferate online, what he terms digital "subculture[s] based upon nonfalsfiable beliefs." Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* 2nd Edition (Berkley: University of California Press, 2013), 185.

34. Andrejevic, 119.

35. Lippman, Walter. *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, Inc., 1922), 95.

36. Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 38.

37. Anker, Elisabeth R. *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

38. See Scott Krzych, "The Price of Knowledge: Hysterical Discourse in Anti-Michael Moore Documentaries," *The Comparatist* 39 (October 2015): 80-100.

39. Alterman, Eric. *Kabuki Democracy: The System vs. Barack Obama* (New York: Nation Books, 2011), 100-06.

40. Zaitchick, Alexander. *Common Nonsense: Glenn Beck and the Triumph of Ignorance* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010), 150-59.

41. Brock, David, and Ari Rabin-Havt. *The Fox Effect: How Roger Ailes Turned a Network Into a Propaganda Machine* (New York: Anchor Books, 2012), 104-42.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*: a case study on mythmaking and making history

by Robert Alpert

> "You get your story and you hold onto it, and every time you tell it, you forget it more."
> —Laurie Anderson in *Heart of a Dog* (2015)

The mythology of *Zero Dark Thirty*

John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) is among the most quoted movies in U.S. cinema for the generation of U.S. filmmakers who grew up in the aftermath of World War II, such as Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Martin Scorsese and Paul Schrader. Its celebrated story tells of the pursuit by the obsessive and racist Ethan Edwards, played by John Wayne, of a group of Comanches who have destroyed the homestead of Edwards' brother, Aaron (Walter Coy). Pursuing these Comanches both in order to wreak revenge for the rape and murder of his brother's wife, Martha (Dorothy Jordan), with whom Ethan has secretly been in love, and to rescue Martha's abducted daughter, Debbie (Natalie Wood), Ethan is relentless. "We'll find 'em. Just as sure as the turnin' of the earth," he tells Debbie's adopted brother Martin (Jeffrey Hunter), who alone accompanies Ethan where others have given up. Martin knows that, in fact, Ethan intends to kill Debbie, now an adolescent living as the wife of "Scar" (Henry Brandon), the leader of the Comanches. Eventually finding Scar after a search of many years, Ethan scalps Scar whom Martin has already killed, and then sweeps the terrified Debbie into his arms, unexpectedly, telling her simply, "Let's go home, Debbie." The film closes with the iconic image of Ethan reuniting Debbie with the Jorgensens, another American pioneering family, and the door closing on Ethan who remains outside their frontier home. While making possible American civilization in the wilderness that is the American West, Ethan Edwards condemns himself to continue to wander in that wilderness.



John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) dramatizes a quest for vengeance. Moments before the slaughter of her family, young Debbie cowers next to a gravestone.



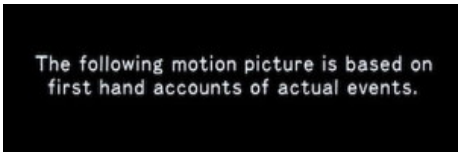
The leader of the Comanche band, Scar, blows his horn, initiating the slaughter.



The next morning Ethan sees from afar the burning frontier home of his brother Aaron.



Pursuing the Comanche band, together with his adopted nephew Martin, Ethan in *The Searchers* is relentless, insisting that he will find and wreak vengeance upon the Comanches as sure as the

	
He sees inside that home the sexually violated body of Aaron's wife, Martha, whom Ethan had secretly loved. Ethan embarks upon his quest for vengeance.	In contrast to the fictional narrative of *The Searchers*, *Zero Dark Thirty* is nonfiction.
	
It, too, however, dramatizes a quest for vengeance. Over a black screen, we hear the recorded, last moment conversations of Americans killed on 9/11.	Revenge for 9/11 begins with the CIA's "Saudi Group." CIA agents engage in "enhanced interrogation techniques," i.e. torture, in order to find and kill those responsible for 9/11.

Kathryn Bigelow is a U.S. filmmaker of genre movies, including movies about bikers (*The Loveless*), vampires (*Near Dark*), cops (*Blue Steel*), surfers (*Point Break*), submarines (*K-19: The Widowmaker*) and most recently war movies (*The Hurt Locker*). Like John Ford, who famously announced that he "makes Westerns,[1] [open notes in new window] she directs action movies in which she repeats generic plots and characters and in the process has acted as a cultural critic of the United States. Moreover, like many classic directors of Hollywood's studio system, she has consistently worked with certain screenwriters, each of whom has influenced her movies. Thus, following her initial movie, *The Loveless* (1982), a slow moving biker movie that she co-directed with fellow Columbia Film School graduate Monty Montgomery, she worked with Eric Red on *Near Dark* (1987) and *Blue Steel* (1990), her earliest and cleanest genre movies; with James Cameron on *Point Break* (1991)(with Cameron as producer) and *Strange Days* (1995), in which she developed further her theme of doppelgangers; and with Christopher Kyle on *The Weight of Water* (2000) and *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002), more traditional, plot-driven movies that followed the commercial failure of the large-budgeted *Strange Days*.

"turnin' of the earth."



From a blinding snowstorm to the blistering heat of Monument Valley, the seasons pass as Ethan and Martin continue in their pursuit for vengeance.



Zero Dark Thirty: Maya's career at the CIA begins with her watching the torture of a "detainee", removing her black mask to reveal unexpectedly that she is a woman.

Bigelow has worked with screenwriter Mark Boal on her two latest efforts, *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Both are war movies that focus upon the U.S. engagement in the Middle East in response to 9/11. Both place the audience "in the middle of events" and "on the ground."[2] Moreover, the mainstream media and the public have praised both movies, with *The Hurt Locker* receiving several Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Original Screenplay, and with *Zero Dark Thirty* nominated for several Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay. *Zero Dark Thirty* received an Academy Award, however, only for Best Achievement in Sound Editing —with the awards for Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay going to another Middle East war drama, *Argo* (2012).[3] This slight is surely the result of the political controversy that surrounded the film's release—its depiction of torture, the cooperation that Bigelow and Boal received from the U.S. government, namely the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Department of Defense (DOD) and the White House (WH), and the movie's initial release date that would have coincided with the U.S. presidential election between incumbent President Barack Obama and the former governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Mitt Romney.

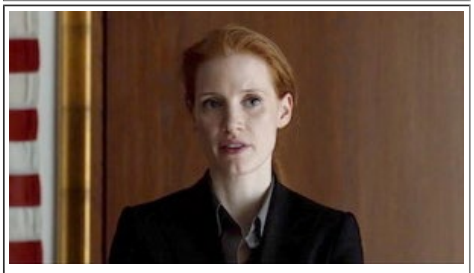
In depicting the finding and killing of Osama bin Laden, the leader of al-Qaeda, Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* reenacts Ford's *The Searchers*.[4] Like the opening massacre of the Edwards homestead, Bigelow's film begins with the depiction of 9/11 through a black screen over which we hear the recorded voices of those killed that day. The remainder of the movie follows the obsessive efforts over many years of a CIA intelligence analyst, Maya (Jessica Chastain), to find and kill bin Laden, the person responsible for 9/11, notwithstanding the skepticism and repeated refusal of most others at the CIA to support her efforts at finding him. Like Ford's relentless Ethan, Maya is cold-blooded in her pursuit. Following the death of her friend Jessica (Jessica Ehle), a senior CIA analyst, from a suicide car bombing, she vows revenge, "I'm going to smoke everyone involved in this op and then I'm going to kill Osama bin Laden." Recruited out of high school, she's not just "fuckin' smart"—"We're all smart," as the CIA Director (James Gandolfini)[5] casually says—but as her station chief in Pakistan Joseph Bradley (Kyle Chandler) observes, "Washington says she's a killer." Ironically, when Bradley later refuses to support her efforts, she publicly exposes his identity as her station chief, resulting his dismissal. Like Ethan Edwards, she's implacable, insisting to the CIA Director and others that the chances are 100% that the person whom she's identified and who is under surveillance at a compound in Abbottabad is, in fact, bin Laden.



In her pursuit of vengeance for 9/11, she, too, is relentless. Following a lead about the possible location of bin Laden, she now oversees the torture of a key "detainee."



Adding to her desire for vengeance is the suicide killing of her one friend at the CIA, a mother of three, as we learn only following her death. Maya vows that she'll smoke everyone involved "in this op and then kill bin Laden."



Instructed not to sit at the main conference table, she nevertheless informs the CIA director that she's "the mother fucker" who located the compound where bin Laden may be residing.



Maya's insistence that's there's a 100% likelihood that she's located bin Laden's compound provides the necessary confidence to the Navy SEAL team that successfully raids the compound.

The ending of *Zero Dark Thirty* especially evokes *The Searchers*. Like the killing of Scar in *The Searchers* during the raid of the Comanche camp by the Texas Rangers, the killing of bin Laden by the U.S. Navy SEAL Team 6 seems almost incidental.[6] Just as Martin kills Scar off-screen, the killing of bin Laden by one of the members of the Navy Seal Team can easily be missed. Bin Laden appears fleetingly in the confusion of the raid, and the shooting of him is sudden and barely noticeable in that confusion. The leader of the Navy Seals then announces to Maya the success of the raid by one word, "Geronimo," and the movie's focus remains upon Maya. Triumphantly identifying the dead body of bin Laden at a U.S. military camp as "agency expert" as well as implicit next of kin,[7] Maya is alone in the next scene, a small figure lost in the large cargo bay of a military transport plane. The plane's pilot speaks the film's last lines, observing,

> "You must be pretty important. You gotta whole plane to yourself. Where you wanna go?"

Maya remains silent. Where the real Maya supposedly cried upon her identification of bin Laden's body,[8] Maya in the movie only now cries. Her story a paean to individualism, she implicitly acknowledges that she, like Ethan Edwards, has no home but instead, having her wreaked vengeance, will continue to wander.[9]



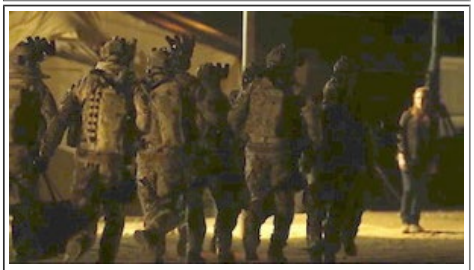
The Searchers: Scar's legs appear ominously at the tent opening as Martin is about to rescue Debbie, a Comanche captive for many years.



Having agreed to return home with Martin, Debbie screams upon seeing Scar.



Martin without pause repeatedly fires at and kills Scar.

	
Hearing Martin's shots, the Texas Rangers raid the Comanche camp. Ethan later emerges from the tent with Scar's scalp hanging from his hand. Vengeance is complete.	*Zero Dark Thirty*: During the raid on bin Laden's compound, a member of the SEAL team calls out bin Laden's name. He then fires his weapon at a fleeting, unseen figure.
	
He informs the leader of the SEAL team that it's a "possible jackpot," firing repeatedly into the barely visible body now lying on the ground.	A fleeting image of the man who shot bin Laden.
	
Following the SEAL team raid, Maya watches as the team rushes past her, carrying a body bag.	Maya unzips the body bag and identifies the dead body as that of bin Laden. Vengeance is complete.



Zero Dark Thirty, of course, reverses the hero's gender. The iconic John Wayne who played Ethan Edwards in *The Searchers* becomes in *Zero Dark Thirty* the semi-fictional character Maya played by Jessica Chastain. Bigelow, in fact, was clearly pleased in learning from the CIA during the production of *Zero Dark Thirty* that the CIA intelligence analyst primarily responsible for finding bin Laden was a woman. "Bigelow, the driven director who tells the story of the driven operative, says she felt as if she'd been dealt 'a royal flush' when they discovered a young woman at the center of the Osama hunt."[10] Viewing Maya's

The Searchers: Having successfully hunted down Scar, Ethan feels pain, as the door to the Jorgensen home is about to close upon him, forcing him to wander the Western plains.



Zero Dark Thirty: Having successfully hunted down bin Laden, Maya enters a cargo plane in order to return stateside.



"Where you wanna' go?" the pilot asks.



Maya has no answer. She cries. She's alone. She, too, will wander without purpose.

obsessiveness as evocative of the heroine of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991),[11] Bigelow in *Zero Dark Thirty* underscores how Maya is a woman in a world dominated by men and in the process reverses Hollywood's gender clichés. She introduces Maya as a hooded figure in an interrogation scene in which a CIA intelligence officer, Dan (Jason Clarke), tortures (through "enhanced interrogation techniques") a "detainee." Only outside the cell does Maya remove her hood, revealing—unexpectedly for most audience members—that she is a woman. Dan later mocks the prisoner, Ammar (Reda Kateb), with Maya's presence and her gender. "You don't mind if my female colleague checks out your junk?" he asks, and then leaves Maya alone with him in the hopes that her gender will sway him to talk. "Please help me," Ammar pleads. The consummate professional, she coolly replies, "You can help yourself by being truthful."

Undoubtedly like Bigelow in Hollywood, Maya is well aware of the isolation resulting from her sex. Thus, at a high-level meeting at the CIA's headquarters, she demonstrates that she can out macho these men, introducing herself to the CIA Director in the following exchange:

> CIA Director: "And how close is it to the house?"
> George (Mark Strong), a senior CIA Supervisor: "About a mile."
> Maya:Four thousand, two hundred, twenty-one feet. It's closer to eight-tenths of a mile."
> CIA Director: "Who are you?"
> Maya: "I'm the motherfucker that found this place. Sir."

Likewise, when the CIA must assess the chances of successfully finding bin Laden at the Abbottabad compound, she openly mocks this all-male group in the room:

> "100% he's there. OK, 95%, 'cause I know certainty freaks you guys out, but it's 100."

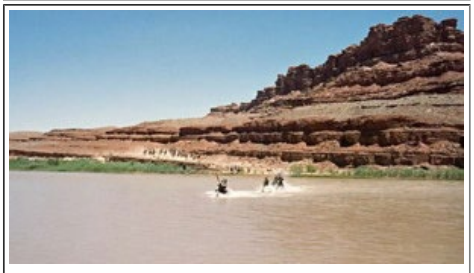
Notwithstanding, this symbolically progressive gender role-reversal, Maya retains the mythic role of the male John Wayne. That Maya, a woman, takes on the cultural identification of the male transposes our expectations. Nevertheless, the role retains the cultural characteristics of the iconic Wayne so that we adjust our expectations of gender accordingly. Maya's success as a woman becomes subsumed within the political victory by the U.S. over its adversary, a culture no less barbaric than the Comanches whom Ethan Edwards defeated. Maya barely escapes the al-Qaeda gunmen who unexpectedly attack her while she is driving out of her residence early one morning in the same way that Ethan Edwards and the Texas Rangers barely escape the Comanches who ambush them on an open plain. Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty* simply assumes the mantle of the Western hero in America's triumph over the events of 9/11.



The Searchers: While pursuing the Comanches responsible for the slaughter of Ethan's brother and family, Ethan and the others with him find themselves surrounded by that same band.



They flee from the surrounding Comanches and ...

	
... seek refuge across a river.	They escape, by successfully holding off the Comanches who try to cross the river.
	
Zero Dark Thirty: Having discovered a lead to bin Laden's location, Maya exits one morning by car from her fortified residence in Pakistan.	Terrorists fire upon her as she exits.
	
The glass to her windshield is bullet proof.	Maya escapes, by reversing her car back into the residence where the security guard closes a solid metal gate behind her.

Making the mythology

Zero Dark Thirty updates *The Searchers* with the American West now coinciding with the U.S.'s global reach extending beyond its geographical borders. In the context of that global reach, it is not surprising that the U.S. government has a formal policy of assisting Hollywood filmmakers. Thus, the CIA maintains an "Entertainment Industry Liaison" whose goal is the "accurate portrayal of the men

Appendix of original documents.
(Click on hyperlink to open document in new window.)

The CIA's Entertainment Industry Liaison page on the CIA web site offers help to those in the entertainment industry by providing greater

authenticity to scripts and stories.

Letter that Bigelow and Boal wrote to the CIA on May 10, 2011 about their film project. They say they intend to make "accuracy and authenticity hallmarks of the production….[T]ruth really is more interesting than fiction."

Robert Mehal email summarizing Boal meeting : An internal government memo notes that Boal has emphasized in a meeting his desire for an "accurate recreation" and that he's "[n]ot interested in giving away any TTPs (…proud at not giving anything away in *Hurt Locker*)."

Marie Harf email inviting attendance at Boal meeting: In an internal CIA email from June, 2011, a CIA agent solicits others to meet with Boal, a "serious filmmaker" who won Academy Awards for *The Hurt Locker* and "who's looking to do an accurate portrayal (at least as far as Hollywood goes) of UBL and the operation."

A CIA agent again solicits others to meet with Boal. Boal "has agreed to share scripts and details about the movie…so we're absolutely comfortable with what he will be showing."

Marie Harf email commenting on upcoming Bigelow meeting with Boal: An internal CIA email announces the upcoming visit by both Bigelow and Boal. "Both Kathryn and Mark have told us how impressed they are with the Agency's work in the UBL operation and how eager they are to bring that to the screen."

One page from a 16-page transcript of a meeting attended by Bigelow, Boal and several representatives from the U.S. Department of Defense in July 2011.

The White House visitor request records for Boal's visits to the White House in late June and early July 2011.

Senator Feinstein and others write Sony in September 2012: "We are fans of many of your movies, and we understand the special role that movies play in our lives, but the fundamental problem is that people who see *Zero Dark Thirty* will believe that the events it portrays are facts. The film therefore has the potential to shape American public opinion in a disturbing and misleading manner. Recent public opinion polls suggest that a narrow majority of Americans believe that torture can be justified as an effective form of intelligence gathering. This is false." (3 pages--page 1, page 2, and page 3)

Director of National Intelligence James Clapper's letter to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence: Only following Edward Snowden's unauthorized disclosures about the NSA's massive surveillance does Clapper write Senator Wyden to correct his sworn testimony: "I simply didn't think of Section 215 of the Patriot Act… Thus, my response was clearly erroneous…. I can now openly correct it because the existence of the metadata collection program has been

and women of the CIA, and the skill, innovation, daring, and commitment to public service that defines them." The CIA affirmatively encourages filmmakers, such as Bigelow, to work with it:

> "If you are part of the entertainment industry, and are working on a project that deals with the CIA, the Agency may be able to help you. We are in a position to give greater authenticity to scripts, stories, and other products in development. That can mean answering questions, debunking myths, or arranging visits to the CIA to meet the people who know intelligence…"[12]

In the case of *Zero Dark Thirty* Mark Boal approached the CIA by emphasizing a desire for "accuracy and authenticity."[13] The filmmakers would take an approach similar to that of their prior movie, the commercially and critically successful *The Hurt Locker*, where Boal had been embedded with U.S. troops in Iraq, and his screenplay had resulted from that experience.

In that instance, the U.S. government had embedded journalists, including Boal, with U.S. troops in an effort to control the media portrayal of that war. In this instance, the U.S. government's interest in Boal and Bigelow and its decision to grant them access to information, including access to the participants in the May 2, 2011 raid on bin Laden's compound, reflected its view of Bigelow as a director who would not only accurately document events but who would also—more importantly—authentically promote them through a uniquely American mythology.[14]

During the process of approving Boal and Bigelow, the DOD's public relations officer in an email to the DOD's Undersecretary[15] quoted an article in its entirety that had appeared in the *Boston Review*:

> "[T]he first account of Osama Bin Laden's death was like the screenplay for a John Wayne movie... Old-fashioned justice was served, not the law on the books, but the law of the Western frontier that has long been cinema's stock and trade. The villain dies with a gun in his hand, and the hero in the white hat, honest and honorable, overcomes impossible odds."

While the writer of the article, Alan Stone, notes that later disclosures undermined that portrayal of the raid as "flawless," his article nevertheless goes on to speculate:

> "Which version of the story will take its place in popular history? No doubt Hollywood will have something to say about that."

The article finds unequivocal support in *The Hurt Locker* for the view that Bigelow would be uniquely positioned to portray the raid:

> "*The Hurt Locker* thus begins as a story of ineptitude and futility. These are not invincible soldiers like John Wayne.... Sergeant James [however] leads these two men—one shaken and one broken. He is an existential antihero who believes in nothing but his project, like the doctor in Camus's *The Plague*. ....
>
> "He is one of those rare workmen who enjoys his craft above all else. .... And he is, as the anonymous critic would have it, heartbreakingly human.
>
> "With *The Hurt Locker*, Bigelow shows a quality that many directors lack: compassion enough to make all her characters human. If any filmmaker is to tell the story of Bin Laden's pursuit and killing, we

declassified." The authenticity offered by the CIA and depicted in *Zero Dark Thirty* is a form of tradecraft. Movies lie. (2 pages--page 1 and page 2)



The CIA in 2005 destroyed videotapes documenting its torture of "detainees". In turn, the U.S. Senate Committee (chaired by Senator Feinstein) in 2010 removed documents from the CIA's facilities while compiling its report on the CIA's use of torture. It secured those documents on the Senate premises.



The CIA responded by electronically hacking the Senate Committee's computers. Its director (John Brennan) admits in July 2014 that it spied on the Committee responsible for oversight of the CIA.

> would be fortunate that it be she. She might not vindicate your political sensibilities, but she will make it real."[16]

Bigelow could portray the CIA's search for bin Laden and the SEAL raid on his Abbottabad compound in the character of a John Wayne as the consummate professional, in other words, John Wayne as depicted not in a John Ford movie but John Wayne as the Howard Hawks hero in such movies as *Red River* (1948) and *Rio Bravo* (1959).[17] The government's working with Bigelow could result in the recreation of a John Wayne movie—updated so as to be "real" but in the process "political."

Wanting to "'put out [their] story' to shape public and Congressional opinion,"[18] the CIA cooperated with and assisted Bigelow and Boal in making their movie.

> "The Central Intelligence Agency arranged for the filmmakers to meet with four of its officers who played a role in planning the raid. A Department of Defense official offered to introduce them to a U.S. Navy SEAL who was also involved in the planning. The filmmakers were told the full name of the Navy SEAL, and the first names of the CIA officers."[19]

The filmmakers also met with the highest levels of government at the DOD[20] as well as with officials at the WH.[21] In return, the filmmakers not only undertook to honor the government's claims of confidentiality[22] but also acceded to change the movie as requested by the government.[23] In one instance in particular, the government acceded to the filmmakers' request not to delete a scene—the scene in which Maya derives her intelligence from watching videotapes of CIA torture. Here the filmmakers convinced the government that including that scene would make the movie more cinematic. Ironically, the CIA told the filmmakers that there had been no such videotapes yet later admitted its destroying those videotapes, resulting in a bitter political controversy with the U.S. Congress. On the other hand, by granting the filmmakers' access, the CIA facilitated a portrayal in *Zero Dark Thirty* of how the CIA had supposedly learned of bin Laden's compound through "enhanced interrogation techniques," a story later documented as false.[24]

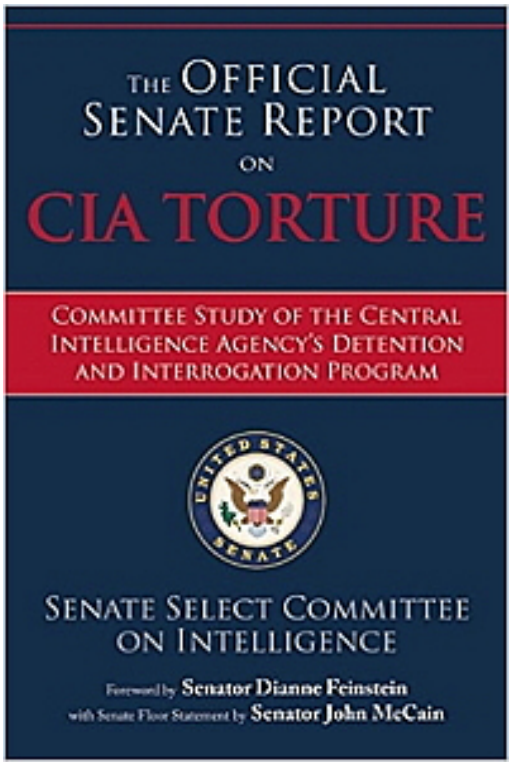
Following the movie's release in December 2012, the CIA seemingly disassociated itself from the completed movie, commenting that the movie had falsely conveyed the impression that the "enhanced interrogation techniques" had played a "key" element in finding bin Laden.[25] Nevertheless, the government found in the filmmakers an effective means for selectively leaking information about past events and conveying those events in a fictional retelling of history consistent with American heroics.[26] Thus, while identifying three aspects in which the film "departs from reality," the CIA's "Statement to Employees" at the time of the film's release iterates the government's mythology, namely

> "that the Bin Ladin operation was a landmark achievement by our country, by our military, by our Intelligence Community, and by our Agency."[27]

Maya's triumph through her obsessive gathering of intelligence, combined with the Seal team's professional raid, reiterates that achievement on the screen complete with a Hollywood ending.

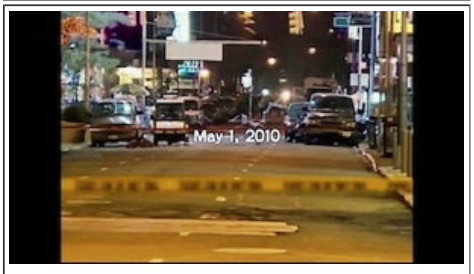
The filmmakers touted the U.S. government's cooperation and the resulting supposed accuracy in the film's opening credit:

> "The following motion picture is based on first hand accounts of actual events."



The U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee releases in December 2014 its Report on CIA Torture. According to the Report, the CIA falsely claimed that its torture of "detainees" was effective. The Report is available for purchase on Amazon.

While Boal has argued, in response to criticism about the movie's accuracy, that the movie is a fictional portrayal, not a documentary,[28] Boal based his fictional characters on real people,[29] set out to produce "an accurate recreation of a historical event"[30] and has spoken at length about the accuracy of the film's depiction of the compound and the raid on that compound.[31] Bigelow has likewise expressed her belief in the essential accuracy and authenticity of the movie, stating that the movie is a "first draft of history."[32] If, as she has noted, [33] 9/11 is the current generation's JFK assassination, then she is new Oliver Stone, creating in *Zero Dark Thirty* a seeming equivalent of *Platoon* (1986), the depiction of an earlier U.S. generation's trauma resulting from the war in Viet Nam.[34]

	
In addition to announcing that *Zero Dark Thirty* "is based on first hand accounts of actual events," the movie continuously intersperses its dramatic events with exact dates ...	... as well as with the names of places where the reenactment of terrorist activities are depicted in the movie.
	
For example, many years after 9/11 ...	... a terrorist bomb is discovered and defused in NYC's Times Square.
	
Close-ups highlight inconsequential objects, enhancing the sense that the movie is documenting authentic events.	The movie fragments space, enhancing the "on the ground" feel of the movie's reenactment of these historical events.

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Zero Dark Thirty documents history. Following Maya's hunch, a CIA operative, who is largely unknown to viewers, hunts for Ibrahim Sayeed, a courier for bin Laden.

Enforcing the mythology

If "the past is just a story we tell ourselves,"[35] [open notes in new window] then to create a story that defines that past also means to control both our present and future, particularly in the case of movies where the power of photographic reproduction collapses the distance between object and symbol, events and their representation. Significantly, while promoting a global mythology through its assistance to Boal and Bigelow, the U.S. government simultaneously denied access to others who might challenge the story told in *Zero Dark Thirty*.



The operative is always on the move. The camera catches him seemingly unaware from a variety of angles and distances. The viewer is "on the ground."



Sometimes the operative nearly disappears.



At other times we watch unknown persons in the crowd looking off-screen. The camera swerves, and suddenly, unexpectedly, we catch sight of the operative who seems to move independently of the camera.



The operative is seen from afar, caught momentarily moving amidst unknown objects in the foreground.



The operative is one person lost among a crowd of similarly active and similarly dressed persons. He blends in and becomes indistinguishable. Carts are piled high with fruit, each cart likewise indistinguishable from the next.

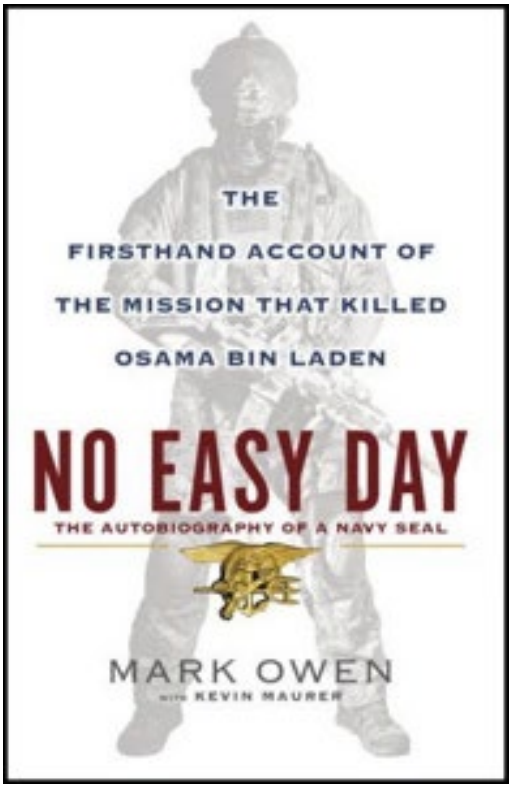


We lose sight of the operative in a vast marketplace. History, too, lacks significance - but for the narrative coherence that *Zero Dark Thirty* provides.

U.S. courts have historically given deference to the U.S. government's claim of

"national security" under the doctrine known as "states secrets."[36] Thus, while the U.S. Congress enacted the U.S. Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) in order to promote open government through the public disclosure of government documents, the Act includes an exemption for "national security." Thus courts will often refuse to compel the disclosure of information under that exemption even when the government has seemingly waived the exemption. Where courts have found, for example, there was a waiver of the confidentiality of the attorney-client privilege because an unrelated third party was present, courts have upheld the national security exemption even when the government has disclosed that same information to those outside of government. In effect, the FOIA disclosure must be redundant before a court will compel its disclosure.[37]

In the case of *Zero Dark Thirty*, the U.S. government successfully resisted efforts by third parties to obtain documents that would have identified the access given to Boal and Bigelow, namely "the names of the SEAL and the CIA officers" with whom the filmmakers had spoken.[38] Moreover, nearly all of the documents produced in response to a FOIA request were redacted, such as emails between the government and the filmmakers, internal government emails, and memos of meetings between the government and the filmmakers. This was especially the case for documents originating with the CIA, where in some instances the documents are so heavily redacted as to be barely readable.[39] Thus, the government disclosed to the filmmakers the information that it wanted leaked



"Mark Owen"s *No Easy Day*: The CIA objects to a book about the raid on bin Laden's compound written by "Mark Owen", a member of the SEAL team who participated in the raid, for failing to pre-clear his book.



"Medal of Honor" video game EA screenshot: The CIA also objects to the possible disclosure of classified information in connection with a video game about the exploits of the Navy SEALS.

while simultaneously barring access to others who sought to learn what had been disclosed and then reported on the screen. Indeed, in its effort to restrict public disclosure beyond what it deemed appropriate, the government threatened sanctions even against members of the SEAL team who had participated in the raid. Some of them had sought to take commercial advantage of their participation, whether through writing and publishing a first-hand account of the raid or acting as consultants to a video game about the Navy SEALS. In the case of the first-hand account, its author, a former member of the Navy SEALS team, forfeited $6.8 million in royalties and speaking fees in return effectively for his avoiding a criminal prosecution. [40]

Moreover, the courts also upheld on the grounds of "national security" the government's refusal to produce other documents that might have enabled others to test the accuracy and authenticity of filmmakers' depiction, namely, 52 photographs showing post-mortem images of bin Laden, supposedly including both photographs taken at the Abbottabad compound as well as at bin Laden's burial at sea.[41] The government's representatives testified that they had seen these photographs and asserted that their disclosure would violate national security. The trial court's deference to the government's claim of "national security" was unequivocal:

> "The Court declines Plaintiff's invitation to substitute its own judgment about the national-security risks inherent in releasing these records for that of the executive-branch officials who determined that they should be classified."[42]

Leaving aside those photographs that included evidence of facial recognition analysis (and could reasonably be expected to reveal classified intelligence methods) or that identified members of the Navy SEAL team (and might, therefore, be expected to endanger these persons, notwithstanding that they may have already met with Bigelow and Boal), the government argued that the other photographs, wholly "innocuous" and not "graphic" or "gruesome", were a national security risk in that their release would incite violence outside the United States.[43] The government analogized the potential social harm to the publication of the Danish cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad. That had led to hundreds of injuries and deaths as well as to an attack on a U.S. airbase in Afghanistan; it also led to an erroneous article in *Newsweek*, alleging that U.S. soldiers had desecrated the Koran, that had led to deaths and injuries during protests against the United States in Afghanistan and Egypt. [44] The appellate court was no less deferential, if somewhat more careful, than the trial court in



A Navy SEAL team action figure based on *Zero Dark Thirty* is available, however, for purchase on Amazon.



The U.S. Department of Defense's model for planning the raid on bin Laden's compound.



The model for bin Laden's compound as depicted in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

articulating the reason here for upholding the government's claim of "national security"[45]:

> "First, it is important to remember that this case does not involve a First Amendment challenge to an effort by the government to suppress images in the hands of private parties, a challenge that would come out quite differently.... [I]t is a statutory challenge, in which the sole question is whether the CIA has properly invoked FOIA Exemption 1 to authorize withholding images in its own possession.... Second, this is not a case in which the declarants are making predictions about the consequences of releasing just any images. Rather, they are predicting the consequences of releasing an extraordinary set of images, ones that depict American military personnel burying the founder and leader of al Qaeda. Third, the declarants support those predictions not with generalized claims, but with specific, reasonably analogous examples."

In short, the court's decision indicates that U.S. government may withhold information from the public by speculating on possible harm to national security based wholly upon an analogy to past events.

While the appellate court summarily observes that it was "undisputed" that the government was not withholding the images "to shield wrongdoing or avoid embarrassment," there's an element of "catch-22" to this observation. How can one dispute the significance of documents that have not been disclosed? Such a problem arose a few years earlier when the U.S. Supreme Court denied "standing" to parties bringing a lawsuit in which they sought to test the constitutionality of the U.S. Patriot Act's surveillance authorization. The U.S. Supreme Court found that the parties—lawyers, human rights researchers, and journalists—could not demonstrate that the government had obtained warrants for eavesdropping on their communications. It was only later, when Edward Snowden made public his unauthorized disclosures about the U.S. National Security Agency, that these "speculative" claims were effectively vindicated. The U.S. government has, in fact, engaged in wholesale surveillance, both domestic and foreign, under the guise of needing foreign intelligence against terrorism—though it remains unclear to what extent U.S. Courts will acknowledge this vindication.[46] Moreover, left unsaid in the appellate court's decision denying access to the government's photographs of bin Laden is whether there is any expiration date for this classified material, some of which the court, in denying access, acknowledges is qualitatively different from that made public.[47]

This presumption in favor of the government's claim of "national security" in the case of *Zero Dark Thirty* effectively forecloses disclosure to the public and advances a governmental interest that may be wholly political and not coincide with public interest.[48] Would the government have barred the now iconic photographs at Abu Ghraib prison, released by Amnesty International and the Associated Press, because of "national security"? Isn't the need for the disclosure of the bin Laden photographs all the more compelling, because they constitute what the court described as an "extraordinary set of images"? Boal and Bigelow reaped the benefit of the government's self-serving largesse to just them. Given their filmmaking skills, the resulting movie has fostered a narrative in which the



The U.S. announces that it has seized computers and other "intel" during the raid at bin Laden's compound. *Zero Dark Thirty* documents that seizure.



Among the materials released by the U.S. evidencing that seizure of "intel" is a screenshot of bin Laden watching TV.



Citing "national security" and the possible incitement of violence, the U.S. government, however, successfully resists the disclosure of photographs documenting bin Laden's dead body. *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts both the repeated shooting of bin Laden and his dead body.

government's perspective becomes the equivalent of historical events, a goal that coincides with Bigelow's stated purpose in directing the movie, namely to create a "first draft of history."

Moreover, the irony of that largesse is that the government's assistance results in a movie in which the killing and post-mortem images of bin Laden are shown, including scenes in which a Navy SEAL takes photographs of bin Laden immediately after he has been shot and killed at his compound and in which Maya identifies bin Laden's dead body in a military camp. The government simultaneously denies access to the actual images and recreates those same images in a manner consistent with its mythology. Arguing successfully that the release of the actual photographs will harm national security, the government simultaneously facilitates a fictional portrayal that could equally incite violence, such as resulted from the publication of the Danish cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad (as the government cited in its brief) or from the satirical cartoons drawn of the Prophet Muhammad by those killed in the attack on the French newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. However, no violence resulted from the film's release.[49]

Moreover, the power of a fictional portrayal, such as *Zero Dark Thirty*, to define history is implicitly best evidenced by the collective yawn that seems to have resulted from the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's release in early December 2014 of its unclassified, over-500-page report on the CIA's interrogation program. That report found not only that the CIA had engaged in far more extensive torture than was previously revealed but also that such torture had been ineffective.[50] Thus, the Chair of the Committee, together with the Chair and a Ranking Member of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, wrote in mid-December 2014 to the movie's producer, Sony Corporation, protesting *Zero Dark Thirty* as

> "grossly inaccurate and misleading in its suggestion that torture resulted in information that led to the location of Usama bin Laden."[51]

The senators said,

> "The CIA coordinated the release of classified information to the media, including inaccurate information concerning the effectiveness of the CIA's enhanced interrogation techniques."[52]

Their letter to Sony also seem to plead for their helplessness in dispelling the misinformation conveyed in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Under the guise of "national security" the executive branch of the U.S. government successfully shapes the mythology of the raid. Even if there is an expiration date on this "national security" material, it is not likely that anyone will care by the time that it is released. Does anyone care, for example, about the detailed accounts of CIA torture at Guantanamo Bay now that the CIA is belatedly beginning to allow its victims to speak about their memories of those details without violating classified "state secrets"?[53]

The mythology triumphant?

U.S. culture favors pragmatism and commercial business values, and as such movies are considered primarily entertainment, not real and inconsequential. Nevertheless, movie mythmaking inevitably begets efforts at counter-mythmaking. The power of a movie fiction, such as *Zero Dark Thirty*, to create a



In May 2015 PBS releases a one-hour show in which it reiterates the Senate Committee's findings and disputes the accuracy of the events depicted in *Zero Dark Thirty*.



An entire show of *Last Week Tonight* with John Oliver is devoted to The Senate Committee's Report on Torture. President Obama is depicted as begrudgingly acknowledging how "we tortured some folks."



John Oliver observes that most persons, including some U.S. senators, haven't read the Report. Dame Helen Mirren reads selections from the Report.

mythology and hence an historical record resulted in the release about 2 ½ years later of a PBS documentary in which the narrative of the raid is retold. In contrast to *Zero Dark Thirty*, where torture plays a role in finding bin Laden, PBS through its *Frontline* series on May 19, 2015, broadcast a documentary nearly one hour long titled "Secrets, Politics and Torture" that focused on the raid and recast the role of torture in that raid.[54] Thus, for example, the documentary addressed the following:

- the CIA's belief that it was moral to torture since another 9/11 was possible;
- the CIA's destruction of videotapes that had recorded the CIA's torture of "detainees";
- the fear at the CIA when the U.S. Supreme Court held that torture may violate the Geneva Convention under U.S. law and subject its participants to war crimes sanctions;
- the CIA's view that "enhanced interrogation techniques" are not torture;
- the Senate initiation of an investigation upon learning of the CIA's destruction of videotapes; and
- the walking out on a showing of *Zero Dark Thirty* by U.S. Senator Feinstein, the Chair of the Senate Committee that issued the report on the CIA's interrogation techniques, because of the false manner in which the movie portrayed torture as effective.

The broadcast specifically mentions *Zero Dark Thirty* as a presentation of the CIA's view of torture, commenting that such a movie has a "huge impact" on the public perception of past events.

Not surprisingly, much of the U.S. media praised the broadcast for setting the record straight on the role of torture in finding bin Laden.[55] Such praise coincides with the adverse publicity that had initially greeted *Zero Dark Thirty* when the media learned of the government's assistance to the filmmakers. Nevertheless, the broadcast introduces no new information and instead recasts that which had already been disclosed. Moreover, if the broadcast represents an effort to remake the mythology that *Zero Dark Thirty* has created, how successful is a PBS documentary relative to a large-budgeted, Hollywood action movie? A more effective counter to *Zero Dark Thirty* was surely the comic riff on *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* in which Dame Helen Mirren reads without inflection the horrifying details on torture from the Senate Committee's report and Oliver openly mocks the fictional portrayal of torture in the hyped-up TV series *24*.[56] Entertainment and especially the Hollywood ending, as exemplified by *Zero Dark Thirty*, create our mythology and define our perceptions—and not a U.S. Senate Committee's 500-page, redacted findings detailing the ineffectiveness of the CIA torture program or a one-hour PBS documentary broadcast years later.

Moreover, at about the same time as the PBS broadcast, Seymour Hersh published in an early May 2015 issue of *London Review of Books*, a 10,000-word article entitled "The Killing of bin Laden."[57] In contrast to the PBS broadcast, Hersh's article introduces wholly new information that directly contradicts the depiction of events in *Zero Dark Thirty*. A celebrated journalist, who, among other things, had disclosed the My Lai massacre and its cover up during the U.S. war in Viet Nam and had more recently reported on the torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, Hersh disputed through his sources—primarily "a retired senior intelligence official"—the portrayal in *Zero Dark Thirty* that the CIA was solely responsible for finding and killing bin Laden. To the contrary, as Hersh wrote:



Noting that the majority of Americans believe that torture is effective, Oliver plays selections from the TV dramatic series *24* in which counterterrorism agent Jack Bauer is always successful in his use of torture.



Seymour Hersh on CNN: In May 2015, journalist Seymour Hersh, through his interview of a "retired senior intelligence official," writes in the *London Review of Books* how the U.S. government's $25 million reward, not torture, resulted in the finding of bin Laden.



The tradecraft that is associated with bin Laden in *Zero Dark Thirty* finds its equivalent in the exchange at a public hearing between U.S. Senator Wyden and Director of National Intelligence Clapper. Wyden asks: "Does the NSA collect any type of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans?"

- The intelligence that led to the raid resulted not from the torture of a person named in the film as Ammar al-Baluchibut but instead from a walk-in informant, who identified bin Laden's location in response to the U.S. government's offering of a $25 million reward.[58]
- The United States knew in advance of the raid that bin Laden was in the compound, since it had obtained a DNA sample in order to convince President Obama to authorize the raid.[59]
- The Pakistani government was holding bin Laden as a prisoner in Abbottabad and cooperated with the U.S. government as a means of securing additional military aid from the United States.
- The Pakistani government remained silent about its role in assisting the U.S. government, lest it alienate the Taliban, whom Hersh described as "jihadist shock troops" for Pakistan against India with respect to Kashmir.
- During the raid the U.S. SEALs deliberately killed bin Laden, who was then unarmed and undefended given that he was under the Pakistani government's control, in deference to the Pakistani government's fear that if bin Laden were captured, he might disclose that Pakistani forces were holding him prisoner. The killing of bin Laden "was clearly and absolutely a premeditated murder," according to Hersh's source.
- The SEAL team did not fire a few shots into bin Laden; they "obliterated him" in the words of Hersh's retired official.
- The SEAL team seized virtually no material at the compound, let alone garbage bags filled with computers and computer records as depicted in the movie.
- Bin Laden's body was not buried at sea.

Hersh's account clearly contradicts the portrayal of events in *Zero Dark Thirty*. It also contradicts the sworn testimony given on behalf of the CIA in its successful argument against the disclosure of the photographs showing bin Laden after his death, including his supposed burial at sea.[60] Moreover, Hersh attributes the official version of the details of the raid that were released publicly (and depicted in the movie) as a result of the need to reconstruct events following a lack of coordination within the U.S. government, or what Hersh describes as a "poorly constructed cover story."[61]

Both the White House and the CIA, not surprisingly, immediately denied Hersh's retelling of what led to and happened during the raid. The White House issued a flat denial of Hersh's article as "utter nonsense."[62] The CIA indirectly denied Hersh's account through its former Deputy Director and Acting Director Mike Morell. Morell had met with the filmmakers in 2011 and ironically later had issued the CIA's release describing the movie's inaccuracies. Appearing on the *Charlie Rose Show*, Morell now summarily dismissed as inaccurate Hersh's account, claiming that the Pakistani government had not known of bin Laden's location. It had instead willfully remained ignorant. Not incidentally, Morell took the opportunity of Rose's show to describe his briefing in Dallas of former President George Bush on the bin Laden killing (with Bush reacting "like a kid in a candy store") and to characterize the U.S. Senate report on the CIA's use of torture, that few have presumably read and is to some extent now forgotten, as "deeply flawed."[63]

With exceptions,[64] the press also attacked Hersh's account, including Hersh's use of an anonymous source.[65] Indeed, that attack continues unabated. Thus, for example, several months following Hersh's account, Mark Bowden, the author of one of the first books on the raid on bin Laden's compound, *The Finish*,[66] has sharply criticized in *Vanity Fair* an effort at rehabilitating Hersh's account, namely author Jonathan Mahler's cover article in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled "What Do We Really Know About Osama bin Laden's Death?"[67]



Clapper replies under oath: "No, sir…. Not wittingly."



Zero Dark Thirty: The Navy SEAL team adopts night vision goggles for the raid on bin Laden's compound. History is about to be made, and "you are there."



At times barely visible in the darkness, the SEALs are surgically precise. In response to Rambo's question, "We get to win this time."

Bowden notes how his book-length account was based on many interviews, including a lengthy interview with President Obama. He says that Hersh's theory, if accepted, would improbably require that all his sources had consistently and repeatedly lied. In the absence of Mahler's offering any reliable evidence disputing the narrative resulting from his [Bowden's] interviews, Bowden views Mahler's failure to dismiss Hersh as simply promoting a narrative that will delight "conspiracy theorists" everywhere. For his part Mahler observes that reporters typically shape historical events in order to create an interesting narrative, such as Bowden's earlier book (and the later movie) *Black Hawk Down*. Mahler then speculates how Bowden came to shape his particular official narrative, noting, for example, how Bowden had available to him virtually no unclassified paper trail and didn't personally view the supposed photos of bin Laden's dead body, let alone the burial at sea.

Mahler further observes that *Zero Dark Thirty*, in enacting the government's narrative, favors the CIA's agenda to promote the myth that the raid somehow "transformed American politics." Moreover, he openly speculates on how improbable a number of these narrative events are. He found unlikely that the Pakistani government was unaware of bin Laden's nearby presence to the Pakistani military college or that it could fail to detect the CIA's intrusion, considering both the Pakistani air defense and the explosions on the ground during the raid itself. Mahler admittedly raises questions that he is unable to answer, but he offers historical precedent. These include the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that justified U.S. involvement in Viet Nam and the more recent claim about Sadaam Hussain's "weapons of mass destruction" that resulted in the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Of course, as striking as Hersh's account may be in contradicting the government's official report on the finding and killing of bin Laden, his account is surely no less striking than the Senate Committee's findings (based on its examination of more than six million CIA-originating documents) of the CIA's pattern of deliberate obstruction and deceit. Thus, the Senate Committee's Report includes findings that the CIA misrepresented in hearings and in other contexts the brutality of its interrogations and confinements, provided inaccurate information to the U.S. Justice Department, and impeded Congressional and White House oversight.[68] Contrast the portrayal of torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* —whose filmmakers emphasized how the government fully cooperated with them and whose film portrays how torture resulted in the finding of bin Laden—with the Senate Committee's express finding that CIA torture was wholly ineffective.

Indeed, perjury often seems part of the intelligence community's tradecraft. Thus, in March 2013 while *Zero Dark Thirty* was still in release, James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, famously testified before U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that the NSA does not collect "any type of data at all on millions or hundreds of millions of Americans."[69] When, however, in early June 2013 Edward Snowden—one amongst many, many persons knowledgeable about this program but all of whom had kept silent—began releasing classified documents that demonstrated that the NSA was, in fact, engaged in massive surveillance of Americans, Clapper wrote the Senate Committee's Chair and admitted that his sworn testimony had been false.

> "…I realized later that Senator Wyden was asking about Section 215 metadata collection rather than content collection [*sic*]. This was clearly erroneous – for which I apologize….I can now openly correct it because the existence of the metadata program has been declassified [*sic*]….Mistakes will happen, and when I make one, I correct it."[70]

Hersh's account underscores the issue of whether it is ever appropriate to recreate

on the large screen (or on any platform that receives wide distribution) a movie that depicts a recent, historically important event and to rely upon, for that depiction, those who participated in and have much to gain (or lose) from how that event is depicted. The rights of free speech and of a free press, whereby U.S. journalists routinely check and confirm the accuracy of their sources in order to avoid liability, surely do not exhaust the moral obligations of filmmakers who would effectively document historical events—and are motivated by the commercial demands of the marketplace and influenced by their own aesthetic vision.

The authenticity of mythology in *Zero Dark Thirty*

Bigelow and her screenwriter Boal's reliance upon the U.S. government's version of events, as told to them through interviews with those involved in planning and executing the raid, has resulted in a movie that seemingly documents and thereby fixes our collective memory of how the U.S. government found and killed bin Laden. In doing so, Bigelow, as the director of *Zero Dark Thirty*, has created the mythology that will define bin Laden's death long after articles about those events, including this essay, will have been forgotten. Correcting the public perception, as in the case of Hersh's article, is extraordinarily difficult given the power of the entertainment media. If movies have an unprecedented ability to conjure up and recreate our memories, then filmmakers surely have a far greater moral obligation to themselves and their audience in creating history in the name of artistic license. History is hardly neutral. Rather it is what we create in an effort to make sense of and understand our past and thereby who and what we are and will become.

Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* is singularly lacking in self-awareness. In portraying the events leading to the death of bin Laden as a reenactment of *The Searchers*, Bigelow ironically plays the role of reporter Maxwell Scott (Carleton Young) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), a movie which John Ford, the director of *The Searchers*, made a few years later. Interviewing Senator Ransom Stoddard (Jimmy Stewart), who was elected to the U.S. Congress because he was known as the "man who shot [the outlaw] Liberty Valance," Scott learns that, in fact, Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), not Stoddard, had killed Valance. Rather than print that story, Scott deliberately tears up his notes to the interview and famously declares,

> "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

Bigelow in *Zero Dark Thirty* prints the legend as fact. In contrast, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, with its theatricality of actors too old to play their parts[71] and outdoor scenes so clearly Hollywood sets, represents Ford's acknowledgement of how Hollywood movies lie through constructing a mythology. In twice depicting the gunfight in which Valance is killed, Ford unequivocally exposes how the editing and framing of shots deceive audiences in the process of creating that mythology. A conservative filmmaker who believes in tradition, the innate corruption of human civilization and the inevitability of historical fact, Ford accepts the legend even as he acknowledges, documents and extols the deceptiveness necessary to its creation.

Therein lies Ford's authenticity, however, and the emotional response of many, including young, radical filmmaker Jean Luc Godard's supposed reaction to Ethan Edward's sweeping gesture in which he lifts Debbie into his arms. How could he hate John Wayne and his politics and yet be moved by the warmth of that gesture?[72] For all of its seductiveness, Ford's American mythology evidences a Brechtian distancing from the enacted epic drama, and it arouses in us a partial disbelief in that mythology. The iconic shot of the homestead door closing on a now weary John Wayne in *The Searchers* is both anticipated and objectified in the



John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) is about how movies lie. In the initial dramatization of the shooting of the gunfighter Liberty Valance, Ransom Stoddard faces off against the Liberty Valance. Both men are firmly planted on the town sidewalk; there's little or no spatial depth to the shot.

film's opening shot in which Aaron and his family open the door of their soon-to-be-destroyed home to the approaching figure of Aaron's brother Ethan in the distance. *The Searchers* announces from the outset that it is mythmaking. For all of his fascination with the United States, Godard in his early movies also enacted the pleasures of Hollywood genres as well as exposed those genres for their sad, sometimes tragic role in historical mythmaking.

<table>
<tr><td>  </td><td> 
</td></tr>
<tr><td>Stoddard momentarily steps off the sidewalk and into the street in order to retrieve his gun that Valance has easily shot out of his hand.</td><td>Stoddard returns to the sidewalk, however, and seemingly kills Valance.</td></tr>
<tr><td> 
</td><td>  </td></tr>
<tr><td>Stoddard walks off screen right and crosses ...</td><td>... the 180 degree axis of the shot. He encounters his love interest, Hallie. Hallie has chosen Ransom Stoddard over Tom Doniphon.</td></tr>
<tr><td> 
</td><td> 
</td></tr>
<tr><td>The later dramatization of this scene is shot from the perspective an alley, disclosing that Doniphon and Pompey, unbeknownst to the audience or Stoddard and Valance, have been watching the shootout. There is now a spatial depth to the scene.</td><td>Doniphon is, in fact, the man who shot Liberty Valance.</td></tr>
<tr><td></td><td></td></tr>
</table>

	
Like Stoddard in the initial dramatization, Doniphon, too, walks off screen right. However, followed by a momentary black screen and a dissolve ...	... we watch Doniphon explain to Stoddard in another time what we have witnessed. Cinematic conventions enable Ford to reveal to the audience, if transparently, his version of history. In mythologizing events, Ford tells us, movies lie.

Bigelow early in her career as a painter and film student associated with such conceptual and radical artists as Vito Acconci, Philip Glass, Richard Serra, and Susan Sontag.[73] Each of these artists understood the distance necessary to engage and give meaning to their art. Bigelow has increasingly forgotten the emotional disengagement that underlies Ford's movies and the resulting authenticity of his politics in depicting American culture on the movie screen, howsoever conservative those politics may have been. It is not simply a question of the "social and moral obligation to get the facts right," as the U.S. Senators

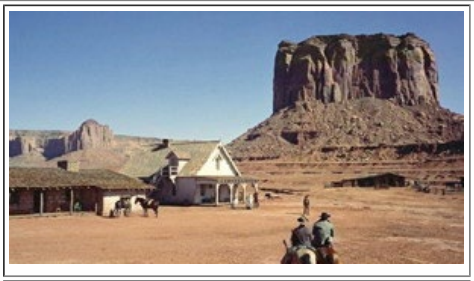


The Searchers: In contrast to *Zero Dark Thirty*, Ford's *The Searchers* is openly mythical about its narrative. It begins with the image of four figures watching Ethan approach Aaron's home.

wrote to Sony in protesting the depiction of how the U.S. found and killed Bin Laden.[74] As a result of the absence of a reflective distance from the mythology enacted on the screen, Bigelow lacks an authenticity in her filmmaking and becomes simply another commercially successful technician, a celebrated filmmaker unspooling the Company line and the mythology that serves to benefit that Company.



Four figures later pose on the porch to the Jorgensen home as Ethan delivers Debbie safely home. The door will then close on Ethan who will return to the barren plains of the American West.



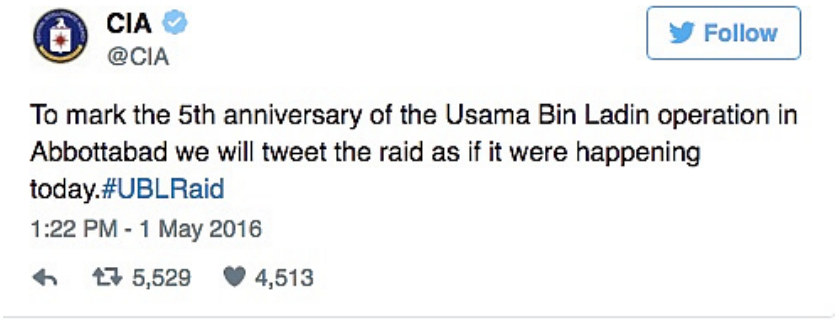
Situating the Jorgensen's home beneath the towering buttes of Monument Valley, *The Searchers* doesn't document the West. It mythologizes the domestication of the West.

Postscript

FOIA requests continue to disclose the nature and extent of the cooperation between the US government and the filmmakers of *Zero Dark Thirty*. Thus, after the writing of this essay, it was reported that:

- CIA director Leon Panetta and movie director Kathryn Bigelow had met and discussed working together on a movie over one year before the raid on Abbottabad.[75]
- The filmmakers wined and dined CIA agents in their efforts to facilitate that cooperation.[76]
- The Government issued two reports about the cooperation, one on the CIA's possible disclosure of classified information and the other examining the ethics surrounding possible benefits to CIA agents from filmmakers Bigelow and Boal.[77]

Undoubtedly there will be additional disclosures with the passage of time. Nevertheless, on the fifth anniversary of the death of bin Laden the CIA tweeted in celebration the Navy SEAL's raid, "remembering the Raid in Abbottabd" as "one of the greatest intelligence operations of all times," thereby echoing the triumphant portrayal of Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Evoking both the larger-than-life, heroic vision of John Wayne in *The Alamo* (1960) and Slyvester Stallone's rewriting of history in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *Zero Dark Thirty* enables the United States to win this time. [80]



Our understanding of the past, our collective history and its mythology, is not a neutral accumulation of facts. Rather, it consists of a selection and arrangement, no different in that respect from the creative process of filmmaking. In both we define our imaginative and moral worth as individuals. Such is the possible authenticity and thereby the value of movies as an art form. Lacking that authenticity, movies merely entertain, seamlessly create for us as paying - but largely passive - consumers the story of our past, and seek to define both our present and future cultural history.

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Notes

1. The full statement attributed to John Ford is: “My name is John Ford. I make Westerns.” There is a dispute over the exact quote as well as the context in which John Ford made this statement. See, for example, Gaylyn Studlar and Matthew Bernstein, Editors, *John Ford Made Westerns: Filming the Legend in the Sound Era* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2001), Introduction, n. 1, and Brian Spittles, *John Ford* (New York: Rutledge 2014), 41. [return to page 1]

2. Kathryn Bigelow’s commentary to the Special Feature “No Small Feat” of the Columbia Pictures DVD of *Zero Dark Thirty*.

3. Ben Affleck directed the movie *Argo*. In an article in *The Washington Post* largely focused upon *Zero Dark Thirty* the writer claims that the CIA assisted Affleck, too, in the production of his movie. Assuming that such was the case, it is unclear, however, from the article as to the nature of that assistance. Thus, the article describes in full that assistance as follows:

> “The government cooperated as much, if not more, on "Argo," the film about the 1979-81 hostage crisis in Iran that won the best picture Oscar. Actor-director Ben Affleck and his team were allowed to film scenes in the lobby of the CIA building in Langley, Virginia; the "Zero Dark Thirty" crew did no such filming.”

Mark Hosenball, “Senate Intelligence Committee Drops bin Laden Film Probe,” *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2013, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/25/entertainment-us-usacongress-cia-film-idU.S.BRE91O19F20130225.

4. A few reviewers at the time of the film’s initial release briefly mentioned the connection to *The Searchers*. See David Stratton, “Zero Dark Thirty tackles an unsettling obsession with Osama Bin Laden,” *The Australian*, January 26, 2013 (“As it unfolded I was reminded of a classic Hollywood film on a similar subject, John Ford's The Searchers...”), accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/zero-dark-thirty-tackles-an-unsettling-obsession-with-osama-bin-laden/story-fn9n8gph-1226561085920;
and Jeff Simon, “Brilliant ‘Zero Dark Thirty’ a high point in American film,” *The Buffalo News*, January 11, 2013, (“The classic American movie I couldn’t forget while watching it is John Ford’s “The Searchers”), accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.buffalonews.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?aid=/20130111/gusto/130119850/1259. Simon concludes his review by wondering if the racism depicted in *The Searchers* is only now beginning in the contemporary world of *Zero Dark Thirty*. And in *The Washington Post*, July 4, 2013, Gene Frankel in “‘The Searchers’ was influential film in its day and still resonates today” comments,

> “Ethan represents the macho, war-without-end, take-no-prisoners

> solution to ethnic conflict and terrorism. His modern heir is Maya, the do-whatever-it-takes heroine of "Zero Dark Thirty" — like Ethan a loner who alienates potential allies and co-workers in a single-minded pursuit of justice and retribution against the enemy."

Accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/the -searchers-was-influential-film-in-its-day-and-still-resonates-today/2013/07/04/8b6d5e48-dffb-11e2-b2d4-ea6d8f477a01_story.html.

5. James Gandolfini was, of course, best known for his role as the mafia boss Tony Soprano in the TV series *The Sopranos*.

6. For a detailed discussion of the U.S. Navy's SEAL Team 6, see Mark Mazzetti, Nicholas Kulish, Christopher Drew, Serge F. Kovaleski, Sean D. Naylor and John Ismay, "SEAL Team 6: A Secret History of Quiet Killings and Blurred Lines," *The New York Times*, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/world/asia/the-secret-history-of-seal-team-6.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=0

7. Bin Laden acts, in effect, as Maya's doppelganger. Bigelow's movies consistently focus upon such figures for its central characters. See Robert Alpert, "Kathryn Bigelow's The Hurt Locker: a jack-in-the-box story," *Jump Cut*, No. 52, summer 2010, http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/alpertHurtlocker/index.html.

8. In the retelling of the Seal Team 6 raid, "Mark Owen" (the pseudonym for Navy SEAL Matt Bissonnette) describes how Jen, the basis for the Maya character, cried during the identification of bin Laden's body:

> "Back in the hangar, Jen stayed on the perimeter of the crowd. She didn't say anything, but I knew from her reaction she could see Bin Laden's body on the floor. With tears rolling down her cheeks, I could tell it was taking a while for Jen to process. She'd spent half a decade tracking this man. And now there he was at her feet."

Mark Owen and Kevin Maurer, *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama Bin Laden* (New York: New American Library 2014), 267.

9. Bigelow has commented that we watch Maya grow up during the movie to the point that she doesn't know who she is. Kathryn Bigelow's commentary to the Special Feature "Targeting Jessica Chastain" of the Columbia Pictures DVD of *Zero Dark Thirty*.

10. Maureen Dowd, "A Tale of Two Women," *The New York Times*, December 11, 2012, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/12/opinion/dowd-a-tale-of-two-women.html.

11. Kathryn Bigelow's commentary to the Special Feature "Targeting Jessica Chastain" of the Columbia Pictures DVD of *Zero Dark Thirty*.

12. Offices of CIA, Public Affairs, Entertainment Industry Liaison, accessed on September 7, 2015, https://www.cia.gov/offices-of-cia/public-affairs/entertainment-industry-liaison.

13. Letter from Mark Boal to George Little, CIA Office of Public Affairs, dated May

10, 2011, accessed on September 18, 2016, https://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Judicial-Watch-Bin-Laden-Movie-CIA-Full-Production.pdf.

14. On the other hand, the U.S. government's facilitating of the movie's production resulted in widespread, adverse publicity. Thus, for example, Peter Maass' article in *The Atlantic*, December 12, 2013, criticized the movie not only for its inaccurate portrayal of the effectiveness of torture but also, and more importantly, for how "*Zero Dark Thirty* represents a new genre of embedded filmmaking that is the problematic offspring of the worrisome endeavor known as embedded journalism." Peter Maass, "Don't Trust 'Zero Dark Thirty,'" accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/12/dont-trust-zero-dark-thirty/266253/.

15. Email of Robert Mehal to Michael Vickers, dated July 8, 2011, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.scribd.com/doc/94352046/Pages-From-Judicial-Watch-Bin-Laden-Movie-DOD-Production-76-86.

16. Alan A. Stone, "Bin Laden: The Movie", *Boston Review*, July-August 2011, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://new.bostonreview.net/BR36.4/alan_a_stone_bin_laden_movie.php.

17. Ford and Hawks represent the two directors who best defined Wayne's persona. Ford made Wayne a star through his portrayal of the Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* (1939), and Hawks introduced a complexity of character to Wayne in his portrayal of Thomas Dunson in *Red River* (1948).

18. See "Report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program Senate Select Intelligence Committee Report on Torture" (redacted), 402, which may be found at the following site, which may be found at the following site, accessed through browser pasting on September 18, 2016, https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CRPT-113srpt288/pdf/CRPT-113srpt288.pdf

19. *Judicial Watch v. U.S. Department of Defense* (D.D.C. 2013), accessed on September 7, 2015 http://legaltimes.typepad.com/files/zdt-op.pdf

20. The extent of the assistance to the filmmakers by the DOD is suggested by the DOD's memorialization of a meeting between the filmmakers and the DOD's Undersecretary Michael Vickers in a minimally redacted memorandum titled "Transcript from background interview with Marl Boal and Katherine Bigelow (15 Ju12011)," accessed on September 7. 2015, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB410/docs/Vickerstranscript.pdf

21. Boal met twice with White House as evidenced by the White House's Visitor Records, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.scribd.com/doc/94427928/White-House-Visitor-Records-Requests

22. In return for the government's assistance in helping him achieve an accurate recreation of an historical event, Boal seemingly undertook to maintain the government's confidentiality to the same extent that he had successfully done on *The Hurt Locker*. Email from Robert Mehal to Michael Vickers dated June 9, 2011, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.scribd.com/doc/94420310/Emails

-from-Mike-Bickers-and-Doublas-Wilson.
Apparently, however, neither Bigelow nor Boal signed a non-disclosure agreement, since no such document was disclosed in response to the FOIA request seeking documents relating to the U.S. government's assistance to the filmmakers.

23. The changes consisted of a reworking the early torture scenes so that Maya does not participate in the torture itself and the deleting of a party scene in which a military officer is both drinking and fires a weapon. Adrian Chen, "Newly Declassified Memo Shows CIA Shaped Zero Dark Thirty's Narrative," *Gawker*, May 6, 2013, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://gawker.com/declassified-memo-shows-how-cia-shaped-zero-dark-thirty-493174407

24. See, for example, "Report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program Senate Select Intelligence Committee Report on Torture" (redacted), 455 ("CIA Destruction of Interrogation Videotapes Leads to Committee Investigation") and ix ("The CIA's use of its enhanced interrogation techniques was not an effective means of acquiring intelligence or gaining cooperation from detainees."), which may be found at the following site, accessed through browser pasting on September 18, 2016, https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CRPT-113srpt288/pdf/CRPT-113srpt288.pdf

25. December 21, 2012, accessed on September 7, 2015, https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/2012-press-releasese-statements/message-from-adcia-zero-dark-thirty.html.

26. In contrast to the executive branch, the U.S. Congress took a more openly hostile attitude toward the filmmakers, considering that it undoubtedly viewed the CIA's assistance to the filmmakers as more cooperative than the CIA's disclosures to the Congressional oversight committees. Thus, the U.S. Senate launched an investigative probe into the filmmakers' contacts with the CIA, though it dropped that probe only days following the movie's failure to win the Academy Awards for Best Picture or Best Original Screenplay. Mark Hosenball, "Senate Intelligence Committee drops bin Laden film probe," Reuters, February 25, 2013, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/25/entertainment-us-usacongress-cia-film-idU.S.BRE91O19F20130225

27. "Statement to Employees from Acting Director Michael Morell: "Zero Dark Thirty," December 21, 2012, accessed on September 7, 2015, https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/2012-press-releasese-statements/message-from-adcia-zero-dark-thirty.html.

28. "As Boal, the screenwriter, has protested in recent interviews, 'It's a movie, not a documentary.'" Jane Mayer, "Zero Conscience in 'Zero Dark Thirty,'" *The New Yorker*, December 14, 2012, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/zero-conscience-in-zero-dark-thirty

29. David Haglund, Aisha Harris, and Forrest Wickman, "Who Are the People in Zero Dark Thirty?" *Slate's Cultural Blog*, January 14, 2013, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/01/14/zero_dark_thirty_fact_vs_fiction_who_are_the_real_life_inspirations_for.html

30. Boal expressed his desire to make "an accurate recreation of a historical event." See email from Robert Mehal to Michael Vickers dated June 9, 2011, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.scribd.com/doc/94420310/Emails-from-Mike-Bickers-and-Doublas-Wilson.

31. Mark Boal's commentary to the Special Feature "The Compound" of the Columbia Pictures DVD of *Zero Dark Thirty*.

32. Kathryn Bigelow interviewed on The Colbert Report, January 22, 2013, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://thecolbertreport.cc.com/videos/u2sxvp/exclusive---kathryn-bigelow-extended-interview

33. Kathryn Bigelow's commentary to the Special Feature "Targeting Jessica Chastain" of the Columbia Pictures DVD.

34. Of course, Oliver Stone throughout his career has routinely directed movies in which the events of contemporary history are made personal and dramatized, e.g. *The Doors* (1991), *JFK* (1991), *Nixon* (1995), *World Trade Center* (2006) and most recently *Snowden*.

35. Samantha, the AI operating system in Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013), makes this observation to Theodore, the person who purchases and forms a romantic relationship with this operating system. Director Sarah Polley applies this same observation to her own life in her purported documentary titled *Stories We Tell* (2012) in which she mixes investigative documentary techniques with a fictional recreation of the past. [return to page 2]

36. See, for example, *Mohamed v. Jeppesen Dataplan* (9th Cir. 2010), accessed on September 7, 2015, http://cdn.ca9.uscourts.gov/datastore/opinions/2010/09/08/08-15693.pdf

37. The Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, where many FOIA lawsuits against the U.S. government are heard, has made clear that a waiver will not easily be found. See, for example, *Students Against Genocide v. Department of State* (D.C. Cir. 2001) (public disclosure requires disclosure in the form of a permanent, pubic record; no waiver where the photographs released to third parties were shown only to members of the UN Security Council), accessed on September 7, 2015, https://law.resource.org/pub/us/case/reporter/F3/257/257.F3d.828.99-5316.html;
Cottone v. Reno (D.C. Cir. 1999)(tapes introduced at trial and not under seal must be disclosed; however, neither constitutionally required disclosure to defense counsel nor tapes withdrawn from the public record fall within a waiver exception), accessed on September 7, 2015, https://law.resource.org/pub/us/case/reporter/F3/193/193.F3d.550.98-5497.html.
But see for a contrary view, *Watkins v. U.S. Bureau of Customs* (9th Cir. 2011) (holding that the D.C. Circuit test is not the only way in which waiver may be found and finding a waiver of the trade secret exemption under FOIA where no strings were attached to information disclosed by U.S. Customs to trademark owners), accessed on September 7, 2015, https://casetext.com/case/watkins-v-us-bureau-of-customs-and-border
Of course, the ninth circuit was not addressing the national security exemption but instead the disclosure of information relating to an intellectual property case and the trade secrets exemption.

38. *Judicial Watch v. U.S. Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency* (D.D.C. 2013), accessed on September 7, 2015, http://legaltimes.typepad.com/files/zdt-op.pdf

39. The documents disclosed can be found on the website of Judicial Watch, which brought suit under FOIA, http://www.judicialwatch.org/press-room/press-releases/13421/ with the documents available on a separate page, https://www.scribd.com/collections/3629662/Bin-Laden-Movie. The full disclosure by the CIA, in particular, may be found at https://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Judicial-Watch-Bin-Laden-Movie-CIA-Full-Production.pdf All of these pages were accessed on September 7, 2015, with the last accessed through browser pasting on September 18, 2016.

40. Nate Jones and Lauren Harper, Editors, with Documents from Jeffrey T. Richelson and Barbara Elias, "The Zero Dark Thirty File: Lifting The Government's Shroud Over the Mission That Killed Osama bin Laden," *The National Security Archive*, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 410, posted on January 17, 2013, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB410/. This archive includes links to about 20 documents or websites relating to the Abbottabad raid an d the killing of bin Laden.

For a description of the U.S. government's civil settlement reached with former Navy SEAL Matt Bissonnette, see Christopher, Drewaug, "Ex-SEAL Member Who Wrote Book on Bin Laden Raid Forfeits $6.8 Million, *The New York Times*, August 19, 2016, accessed on August 20, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/20/us/bin-laden-book-seal-team-6.html?ref=todayspaper. Not surprisingly, Bissonnette's lawyer commented on the arguable inequity of the settlement imposed on Bissonnette: "Mr. Luskin also noted that a number of high-level officials have assisted other authors writing about the Bin Laden raid as well as the creators of the movie 'Zero Dark Thirty.' But, he said, only Mr. Bissonnette has paid any penalties for the disclosures."

41. *Judial Watch Watch v. U.S. Dept. of Defense*, 857 F. Supp. 2d 44 (D.D.C. 2012), *aff'd.*, 715 F.3d 937 (D.C. Cir. 2013). The trial court's decision may be found at http://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/JW-v-DOD-00890-Osama-Bin-Laden-Ruling.pdf and the appellate court's decision may be found at http://www.cadc.uscourts.gov/internet/opinions.nsf/C82B0A642E2CDCB485257B72004F25D6/$file/12-5137-1437137.pdf, both accessed on September 7, 2015.

42. *Judicial Watch v. U.S. Dept. of Defense* (D.D.C. 2012), at 2, accessed on September 7, 2015, at http://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/JW-v-DOD-00890-Osama-Bin-Laden-Ruling.pdf.

43. For an excellent article discussing the distinction between traditionally classified documents, such as face recognition software, and classified material based on the speculative to harm to national security, see Matthew Birkhold, "Unclassified Fictions: The CIA, Secrecy Law, and the Dangerous Rhetoric of Authenticity," *Berkeley Journal of Entertainment and Sports Law*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (May 2014), accessed on September 7, 2015,

http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1038&context=bjesl

44. *Judial Watch v. U.S. Dept. of Defense* (D.C. Cir. 2013), 3 – 4 and 9, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.cadc.uscourts.gov/internet/opinions.nsf/C82B0A642E2CDCB485257B72004F25D6/$file/12-5137-1437137.pdf

45. *Judicial Watch v. U.S. Dept. of Defense* (D.C. Cir. 2013), 10- 11, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.cadc.uscourts.gov/internet/opinions.nsf/C82B0A642E2CDCB485257B72004F25D6/$file/12-5137-1437137.pdf.
The two key affidavits submitted in support of the government's claim that national security was at risk consisted of the
Declaration of John Bennett, Director, National Clandestine Service, CIA, http://www.politico.com/static/PPM223_110926_142.html,
and the Declaration of Robert B. Neller. Lieutenant General, U.S. Marine Corps, http://www.politico.com/static/PPM223_110926_145.html,
both accessed on September 7, 2015.

46. For example, one appellate court reversed a trial court's dismissal of a lawsuit against the U.S. National Security Agency (or NSA), held that the NSA had exceeded its statutory authority under the U.S.A Patriot Act in engaging in the collection of "bulk telephone metadata," but nevertheless remanded the case to the trial court to determine whether a preliminary injunction was the appropriate remedy. *ACLU v. Clapper* (2nd Cir. 2015), accessed on September 18, 2016, https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/field_document/clapper-ca2-opinion.pdf

On the other hand, another court in a per curiam opinion vacated a trial court's preliminary injunction against the NSA's collection of bulk telephone metadata, finding that the individual challenging the collection likely lacked "standing" and remanding to permit discovery on that issue, though with one judge questioning the merits of the claim and other judge dissenting on the remand. *Klayman v. Obama* (D.C. Cir. 2015), accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.cadc.uscourts.gov/internet/opinions.nsf/ED64DC482F286F1785257EAF004F71E8/$file/14-5004-1570210.pdf.

47. "A picture may be worth a thousand words. And perhaps moving pictures bear an even higher value. Yet, in this case, verbal descriptions of the death and burial of Osama Bin Laden will have to suffice, for this Court will not order the release of anything more." *Judicial Watch v. U.S. Dept. of Defense* (D.D.C. 2012), at 1, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.judicialwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/JW-v-DOD-00890-Osama-Bin-Laden-Ruling.pdf

48. Maureen Down was among the first journalists who reported on the assistance provided to Bigelow and Boal, focusing upon the political benefit to White House incumbent President Obama:

> "The White House is also counting on the Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal big-screen version of the killing of Bin Laden to counter Obama's growing reputation as ineffectual. The Sony film by the Oscar-winning pair who made "The Hurt Locker" will no doubt reflect the president's cool, gutsy decision against shaky odds. Just as Obamaland was hoping, the movie is scheduled to open on Oct. 12, 2012 — perfectly

timed to give a home-stretch boost to a campaign that has grown tougher."

Maureen Dowd, "Downgrade Blues," *The New York Times*, August 6, 2011, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/07/opinion/sunday/Dowd--The-Downgrade-Blues.html?_r=3.
In fact, the film was not released until after the election presumably in response to the adverse publicity generated by its initial contemplated release date.

49. There is sometimes a darker, more pernicious aspect to this cloaking of information under the rubric of "national security" while simultaneously releasing that information, albeit in a different format. As Glenn Greenwald has observed, the U.S. may facilitate "leaks" to promote its own view of events while simultaneously criminally prosecuting those such as Edward Snowden who "leak" information that is inconsistent with the U.S. Government's view. Glenn Greenwald, *No Place to Hide* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014), 229.

50. A copy of the redacted version of the "Report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program Senate Select Intelligence Committee Report on Torture" may be found at the following site, accessed on September 18, 2016, https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CRPT-113srpt288/pdf/CRPT-113srpt288.pdf.

51. "Feinstein Releases Statement on 'Zero Dark Thirty,'" December 19, 2012, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=b5946751-2054-404a-89b7-b81e1271efc9.

52. See Finding and Conclusion 10 to the Report of the Senate Select Committee.

53. Jessica Schulberg and Ryan J. Reilly, "U.S. Government Starting To Allow CIA Torture Victims To Discuss Their Own Memories," *The Huffington Post*, June 11, 2015, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/11/guantanamo-cia-torture_n_7552314.html.

54. Frontline's "Secrets, Politics and Torture: the secret history of the CIA's controversial 'enhanced interrogation' methods", May 19, 2015, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/secrets-politics-and-torture/

55. See, for example, Shane Harris, "'Zero Dark Thirty' Was Filled With CIA Lies," *The Daily Beast*, May 19, 2015 (summarizing Frontline's documentary "Secrets, Politics and Torture," including its interview of U.S. Senator Feinstein, the Chair of the Senate Committee), accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/05/19/zero-dark-thirty-was-filled-with-cia-lies.html.
The media expressed this same dismay with *Zero Dark Thirty* when the U.S. Senate Committee released its report in December 2014 on torture. See, for example, Jake Coyle, "CIA report casts new pall over 'Zero Dark Thirty'" *Yahoo! Movies*, December 10, 2014, accessed on September 7, 2015, https://www.yahoo.com/movies/s/cia-report-casts-pall-over-zero-dark-thirty-171142641.html

56. *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* on Torture, June 14, 2015, accessed on September 7, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmeF2rzs

ZSU&feature=em-subs_digest-ctrl-vrecs.
During the show Oliver also notes the results of the poll finding that the majority of Americans believe that torture works and humorously places that belief on the plot demands of the TV series *24* that requires that Jack Bauer's visually graphic uses of torture be effective. Oliver timed the broadcast of his show to coincide with the imminent U.S. Senate vote on a law that would ban torture and thereby render more permanent President Obama's ban as set forth in an executive order. Emmarie Huetteman, "Senate Votes to Turn Presidential Ban on Torture Into Law," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2015, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/17/world/senate-votes-to-turn-presidential-ban-on-torture-into-law.html?_r=0.

57. Seymour M. Hersh, "The Killing of bin Laden," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 37, No. 10, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n10/seymour-m-hersh/the-killing-of-osama-bin-laden.

58. Hersh claims that the informant was relocated to Washington, DC, and now works as a consultant for the CIA. The Pakistani press has since identified this "walk-in" as a former official or spy with Pakistani intelligence who has been granted U.S. citizenship. Amir Mir, "Brig Usman Khalid informed CIA of Osama's presence in Abbottabad," *The International News*, May 12, 2015, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-317717-Brig-Usman-Khalid-informed-CIA-of-Osamas-presence-in-Abbottabad

59. The Pakistani doctor who obtained the DNA sample apparently shared in the $25 million reward, according to Hersh.

60. The Declaration of John Bennett, Director, National Clandestine Service, CIA, sworn to on September 26, 2011, paragraph 11, characterizes the images as "quite graphic" and "gruesome" as well as notes that "many of the images were taken… as his corpse was being transported… to the location where he was ultimately buried at sea" and that "[s]everal of the images depict the preparation of his body for burial as well as the burial itself." http://www.politico.com/static/PPM223_110926_142.html , which was accessed on September 7, 2015

61. Hersh devotes much of his article to how the poorly the announcement of the raid was orchestrated so that stories had to be revised in order to be consistent with President Obama's initial press announcement. For example, Obama's announcement suggests possible cooperation from the Pakistani government, notwithstanding that the CIA had promised Pakistani officials not to make public that cooperation, and that there was a firefight during the raid, when none had occurred. Moreover, since Obama announced that the SEALs took custody of bin Laden's body, the government, according to Hersh, had to create a cover story about an Islamic burial at sea of the body, thereby avoiding the need to produce a body.

62. Dan Lamothe, "'Utter nonsense': CIA and White House blast Seymour Hersh's explosive Osama bin Laden raid story," *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2015, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2015/05/11/utter-nonsense-cia-and-white-house-blast-explosive-osama-bin-laden-raid-story/.

63. The May 11, 2015, appearance of Mike Morell on the Charlie Rose show may

be found at the following site, accessed on September 18, 2016:
https://charlierose.com/videos/21256
Morell stated, in particular, "I believe they [the Pakistanis] didn't want to know." (38.22) He also observed as to the U.S. Senate report:

> "35:58 Mike Morell: ...As we talked about at this table, and I actually give examples, very specific examples in the book where it's wrong, right. It's a deeply flawed document. I wish there was—there were a document that lays out the history and then let's have a conversation about it, particularly about the morality question."

And as to his briefing at the request of U.S. President Obama of former U.S. President Bush, he recounted:

> "43:32 Mike Morell: In Dallas after the bin Laden raid, a briefing for President Bush on everything on the intelligence side and everything on the operational side. And he was like a kid in a candy store.
> 43:43 Charlie Rose: He wanted to know everything.
> 43:45 Mike Morell: Wanted to know everything. And...
> 43:49 Charlie Rose: Because he lived with it.
> 43:45 Mike Morell: Wanted to know everything. And..."

64. David Walsh, "CIA-embedded Hollywood liars and their lies," *World Socialist Website*, May 15, 2015 ("Now we know, thanks to Seymour Hersh and his article in the *London Review of Books*, that, along with everything else, the Bigelow-Boal film was a pack of lies from beginning to end."), accessed on September 7, 2015, https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/05/15/lies-m15.html.

65. See, for example, Peter Bergen, "Was there a cover-up in bin Laden killing?" *CNN*, May 20, 2015 ("Hersh's account of the bin Laden raid is a farrago of nonsense that is contravened by a multitude of eyewitness accounts, inconvenient facts and simple common sense."), accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/11/opinions/bergen-bin-laden-story-a-lie/.
For both a summary and a commentary on these attacks by the media on Hersh's article, see Trevor Timm,"The media's reaction to Seymour Hersh's bin Laden scoop has been disgraceful," *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 15, 2015 ("... instead of trying to build off the details of his story, or to disprove his assertions with additional reporting, journalists have largely attempted to tear down the messenger."), accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.cjr.org/analysis/seymour_hersh_osama_bin_laden.php.

66. Mark Bowden, *The Finish: The Killing of Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Atlantic Press 2012).

67. Compare Mark Bowden, "There's Just One Problem with Those Bin Laden Conspiracy Theories," *Vanity Fair*, October 16, 2015, http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/10/mark-bowden-bin-laden-capture-conspiracy, with Jonathan Mahler, "What Do We Re ally Know About Osama bin Laden's Death?" *New York Times Magazine*, October 15, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/magazine/what-do-we-really-know-about-osama-bin-ladens-death.html?rref=collection%2Fsectioncollection%2Fmagazine&action=click&contentCollection=magazine&region=rank&module=package&version=highlights&contentPlacement=9&pgtype=sectionfront&_r=0, both accessed on October 21, 2015.

68. "Report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program Senate Select Intelligence Committee Report on Torture" (redacted), Findings 3 – 7, which may be found at the following site, accessed through browser pasting on September 7, 2015: CRPT-113srpt288%20(2).pdf. The Senate Committee describes the CIA as a rogue agency. Thus, the Chair in her forward to the Report wrote, "….CIA personnel, aided by two outside contractors, decided to initiate a program of indefinite secret detention and the use of brutal interrogation techniques in violation of U.S. law, treaty obligations, and our values."

69. Senator Ron Wyden's questions and Director James Clapper's responses during the Senate Committee's hearing, March 12, 2013, accessed on September 7, 2015, may be found at http://www.nytimes.com/video/multimedia/100000002274856/nsa-denies-phone-surveillance.html.

70. James Clapper's letter addressed to the Senate Committee Chair, June 21, 2013, accessed on September 7, 2015, may be found at https://www.scribd.com/fullscreen/151361066.
The metadata program's declassification, to which Clapper refers, resulted from Snowden's unauthorized disclosure of the program's existence. Charlie Savage, "Surveillance Court Rules That N.S.A. Can Resume Bulk Data Collection, *The NY Times*, July 1, 2015 ("The program was declassified in June 2013 after its existence was disclosed by the former intelligence contractor Edward J. Snowden."), accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/01/us/politics/fisa-surveillance-court-rules-nsa-can-resume-bulk-data-collection.html?ref=todayspaper.

71. Film critic Andrew Sarris years ago commented upon this incongruity between the age of the actors and the age of the characters that they portrayed in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Vera Miles best exemplifies this incongruity. In *The Searchers* she portrays Laurie Jorgensen, the sweetheart of Wayne's young nephew Martin; in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, made only 6 years later, she portrays Wayne's love interest, Hallie.

72. Of course, John Ford and his vision of the West should not be confused with the Hollywood star John Wayne. Wayne created over many years and in many ways his persona, and even Ford found occasion to find repulsive the dissonance between persona and person. Thus, Ford and Wayne nearly came to blows during the filming of *They Were Expendable* (1945) when Ford became discomfited by the dissonance between Wayne as a popular Hollywood war hero and what Ford viewed as Wayne's cowardice during World War II. Mark Harris, *Five Came Back* (New York: The Penguin Press 2014), 356—61.

73. For a very brief discussion of Bigelow's early years as a painter and film student, see Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond, Editors, *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor* (London: Wildflower Press 2003), 6.

74. The senators' statement to Sony on this point reads in full as follows: "[W]ith the release of *Zero Dark Thirty*, the filmmakers and your production studio are perpetuating the myth that torture is effective. You have a social and moral obligation to get the facts right." "Feinstein Releases Statement on 'Zero Dark Thirty,'" December 19, 2012, accessed on September 7, 2015, http://www.feinstein.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=b5946751-2054-404a-89b7-b81e1271efc9.

75. See the unclassified document disclosed in response to a FOIA by VICE News and reproduced in Jason Leopold and Ky Henderson, "Tequila, Painted Pearls,

and Prada — How the CIA Helped Produce 'Zero Dark Thirty,'" September 9, 2015, *VICE News*, accessed July 20, 2016, https://news.vice.com/article/tequila-painted-pearls-and-prada-how-the-cia-helped-produce-zero-dark-thirty ("April 2010 - D/CIA Panetta and Kathryn Bigelow meet at event where she discusses her film project; D/CIA offers Agency assistance.")

76. See Nicholas Schou, "How the CIA Hoodwinked Hollywood," *The Atlantic*, July 14, 2016, accessed July 20, 2016, http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/07/operation-tinseltown-how-the-cia-manipulates-hollywood/491138/ in which he describes many of the "embarrassing details about the CIA's cozy relationship with Boal and Bigelow" that was set out in the September 2015 article in VICE News.

> "As it turned out, the filmmakers had wined and dined agency officials in Hollywood and at a hotel near CIA headquarters, routinely racking up thousand-dollar restaurant bills. At one point, the Inspector General report stated a female CIA officer mentioned liking the fashion designer Prada. Boal responded by saying 'he knew the designer personally and offered her tickets to a Prada fashion show.'
>
> The same officer later dined with the filmmakers at the Ritz Carlton hotel in Washington, D.C.'s, upscale Georgetown neighborhood, where as a thank-you gift, Bigelow, who had just returned from filming a commercial in Tahiti, gave her a pair of 'black Tahitian pearl earrings.' (The officer gave the jewelry to Langley to be appraised, and thus learned they were fake.) A bottle of tequila that Boal gave another officer, which was supposedly worth 'several hundred dollars,' could be bought for $100. None of the officers kept the gifts and the report cleared them of any wrongdoing."

Not surprisingly, Schou is highly critical of the filmmakers.

> "In the end, the CIA's energetic cooperation with Boal and Bigelow paid off enormously, with *Zero Dark Thirty* serving as the most effective piece of propaganda for the agency's torture program since 24. The film made the case that bin Laden's capture would not have been possible without information that was extracted under torture. The filmmakers might have taken great pains to portray the smallest details of bin Laden's compound accurately. But on this fundamental issue, they blatantly violated the truth."

77. Jason Leopold and Ky Henderson in their article "Tequila, Painted Pearls, and Prada — How the CIA Helped Produce 'Zero Dark Thirty,'" September 9, 2015, *VICE News*, report that:

> "Included in the trove of redacted agency records [produced in response to VICE News' FOIA request] is a March 2014 CIA Office of Inspector General report titled 'Alleged Disclosure of Classified Information by Former D/CIA' — D/CIA refers to the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Leon Panetta — and a separate September 2013 report from the inspector general's office titled 'Potential Ethics Violations Involving Film Producers.'"

See also Adam Zagorin and David Hilzenrath, "Unreleased: Probe Finds CIA Honcho Disclosed Top Secret Info to Hollywood," POGO, Project on Government Oversight, June 4, 2013, accessed July 20, 2016, http://www.pogo.org/our-work/articles/2013/unreleased-probe-finds-cia-disclosed-secret-info.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/.

78. The disclosure of previously unreported events generally related to the raid on bin Laden's compound has continued. For example, a select group of government lawyers had apparently drafted memoranda in advance of the government's raid in which they set out the supporting legal grounds for the raid given, among other reasons, that the raid was on foreign territory and might result in the killing of bin Laden. See Charlie Savage, "How 4 Federal Lawyers Paved the Way to Kill Osama bin Laden," *The New York Times*, October 28, 2015, accessed July 20, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/29/us/politics/obama-legal-authorization-osama-bin-laden-raid.html.

> ("The legal analysis offered the administration wide flexibility to send ground forces onto Pakistani soil without the country's consent, to explicitly authorize a lethal mission, to delay telling Congress until afterward, and to bury a wartime enemy at sea.")

79. Elle Hunt, "CIA 'live tweets' Osama bin Laden raid to mark five-year anniversary," *The Guardian*, May 2, 2016, accessed July 20, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/02/cia-live-tweets-osama-bin-laden-raid-anniversary?utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&utm_campaign=GU+Today+USA+-+Version+CB+header&utm_term=170067&subid=7931573&CMP=ema_565.

CIA director John Brennan's posted message stated, in part:

> "The raid was a masterpiece of planning and execution, and it was the culmination of years of painstaking work by CIA and our Intelligence Community partners. In the words of Admiral William McRaven, who directed the raid, it was 'one of the greatest intelligence operations of all times.' .....
>
> Ridding the world of Usama Bin Ladin was an act of supreme justice. It sent a message to our adversaries that America will never let up in the pursuit of those who threaten us. And it underscored what every Agency officer knows instinctively: that intelligence is essential to our Nation's security, every bit as important to the strength of our democracy as diplomacy, law enforcement, and military service."

"Message from the Director: Remembering the Raid in Abbottabad," April 29, 2016, accessed July 20, 2016, https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/2016-press-releases-statements/message-from-the-director-remembering-the-raid-in-abbottabad.html.

80. Recruited by his former commander to return to Vietnam now that the war is over, commando John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) in director George P. Cosmatos' *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985) famously asks: "Sir, do we get to win this time?"

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Representing incarceration in *Persons of Interest* and *The Oath*

by Christopher Barnes

Speaking explicitly of the War on Terror, W.J.T. Mitchell argues that in our multimedia-saturated age,

> "The shaping of perceptions of history does not have to wait for historians or poets, but is immediately represented in audio-visual-textual images transmitted globally" (xi.)

As proof of the power of images to shape such perceptions, Mitchell observes that while the Obama administration may have released the Bush administration's infamous torture memorandums,

> "What is not public . . . is the visible evidence that would show what the consequences of these memos were for actual human bodies. It is a testimony to the widespread conviction that images are more powerful than words, that the Obama administration was willing to release the verbal memos, but not the visible manifestation of their effects" (129).

Questions of visibility and invisibility are indeed fundamental to understanding how the War on Terror has been conducted, and more specifically, how they structure its politics and policies regarding who the United States imprisons in its military prison sites and how they are treated. Michelle Brown recognizes such a tension between the visibility and invisibility of these practices and sites when she argues,

Through indefinite detention, the practice of extraordinary rendition, and new legal categories, such as that of the unlawful enemy combatant, a penal architecture was established which *resulted in practices intended to be clandestine, invisible, and, simultaneously, common, acceptable, and global*" (124, emphasis mine).

The prison system of the United States' War on Terror, as Brown points out, is paradoxical insofar as it is seemingly invisible and shrouded in secrecy while simultaneously existing as a publicly acknowledged part of the Bush and Obama administrations' tactics in prosecuting alleged terrorists. This article examines two critically under-studied documentaries that, I argue, explore and interrogate the constitutive relationship between vision and indefinite detention in the War on Terror: Alison Maclean and Tobias Perse's *Persons of Interest* (2004) and Laura Poitras' *The Oath* (2010). I contend that both films use the figure of the talking head to address and undermine structures of invisibility in the War on Terror to show how these structures enable the continued apprehension, detention, and torture of alleged terrorists. This includes not only drawing attention to the invisibility of the prisons and prisoners themselves, but it also involves an attempt to complicate and dispel many of the misguided and pernicious beliefs about Islam and Muslims that have served as a pretext for a limitless war against terrorism.

Persons of Interest's self-reflexive use of the talking head convention both reminds viewers of those who cannot testify in front of the camera and also points to the ways that sight and the act of looking structure how we profile and categorize certain bodies as "dangerous." These interviews also reveal the frayed social bonds that result from the aggressive policing practices of law enforcement after September 11. *The Oath*, on the other hand, is centered around two men: Salim Hamdan, a Guantánamo Bay prisoner, the plaintiff in *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*, and a former driver for Osama bin Laden, and his brother-in-law Abu Jandal, bin Laden's former bodyguard who, at the time of filming, was a free man driving a taxi in Yemen. By following their intertwined and divergent paths, the film raises serious questions about the effectiveness of the War on Terror's tactics for interrogating and prosecuting alleged terrorists.

A brief visual essay — *Persons of Interest* and *The Oath*

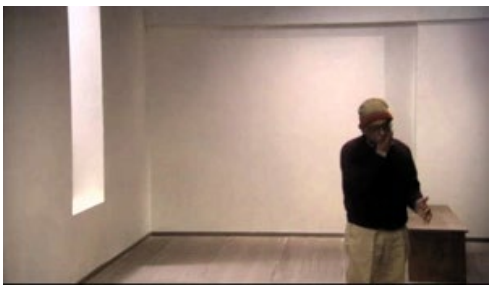
I want to first briefly outline some of the representational strategies used by both films, which I then contextualize within a broader framework of documentary film studies as well as within documentaries that address the surveillance and imprisonment of Muslims and Arabs after September 11. From there, I will then discuss in more depth how these representational strategies are used to criticize the secrecy and opacity of the War on Terror's prison systems.



The spare interview room in which *Persons of Interest* is set acts as a visual metaphor for both the simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility of the interviewees.



Some interview subjects reenact aspects of their imprisonment, drawing our attention to their invisibility as prisoners. Here, Salem Jaffer, at the request of Maclean, imitates the manner in which the FBI psychologist speaks to him while he is detained.



And here, he mimics how he would go to the wash basin in his cell to splash water on his body.



Nabil Ayesh sits against a wall to show how he would pass the time in his cell.



Muhamed Abushaker reads a letter he wrote to his wife Karima Osman while he was in prison. Their interview speaks of another possible looming separation, in which he may be deported to Palestine and her to Egypt, while their daughter is an American citizen with rights in neither country.



For those who have been deported or are still detained, loved ones function as interview substitutes. This is another way to show the continued invisibility of those who are imprisoned and cannot speak for themselves. Here, Amanda Serrano shows the camera her wedding photo.



These interviews make visible the deleterious effects that the mass arrests have on families and communities by showing us families who have been torn apart. Here, one of Shokreia Yaghi's (whose husband was deported to Jordan) son holds up a family photograph.



In other cases, even if the families remain intact, they often still discuss the stress and fear of further surveillance persecution by the United States government. Here, Mateen and Naz Butt discuss the feelings of precarity that have struck their family after Mateen's arrest.



Overall, these images of both individuals and families help to humanize those who are unfairly and maliciously maligned as terrorists.



The Oath's opening shot is footage of Salim Hamdan's interrogation by the U.S. military after his capture in Afghanistan in 2001. This is the only time in which we see Hamdan in front of the camera, rendering him a spectral presence within the film. The inclusion of the computer screen's edge in the opening shot self-reflexively calls attention to ways in which Hamdan is only available through various layers of mediation; he never appears in front of the camera to speak for himself.



Hamdan's absence is also registered in the domestic sphere, as his family poses for a photograph while holding a picture of him.



The film often cuts to compositions of the Guantánamo Bay landscape; neither the prison, nor Hamdan, are present in any of them, signaling the opacity of the prison and the invisibility of the detainees and their suffering.



Janet Hamlin's courtroom drawings are the only images we get of the trial and of Hamdan as the defendant.



Our introduction to Jandal and his son Habib contrasts sharply with Hamdan's absence. Jandal is often charming and gregarious in front of the camera. Hamdan's absence from his family's life becomes even more starkly defined by the many private moments we see with Jandal and Habib…



…such as when he provides religious instruction to him or helps him get ready for school.



Often, Jandal is filmed driving in his taxicab through the Yemeni capital Sana'a. As opposed to Hamdan's imprisonment and immobility, these scenes often emphasize Jandal's mobility.



We also see him as he meets with and provides religious instruction and counseling to young men interested in jihad.



All of these moments challenge the viewer consider how we conceive of dominant, Western depictions of terrorism or of terrorists.

Representing absence

As this brief visual essay shows, both films use numerous representational strategies to address the structures of invisibility that govern these prison sites. Both films are also part of a much longer history within both documentary film and documentary film studies regarding how one represents that for which no photographic or filmic record exists, or for events or situations that exceed representational possibilities.

Questions of representational excess and of absence are often directly engaged by films about historical traumas. Perhaps one of the most well-known examples is Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), which avowedly eschews all archival representations of the Holocaust in favor of personal talking head testimonies from those who survived it, witnessed it, or aided in its perpetuation. Through its unrelenting focus on these talking heads and its return to previous Holocaust sites, *Shoah* engages in a dialectic of past and present, bearing witness to the historical trauma of the Holocaust while also gesturing to the impossibility of its representation. Other films, such as Rithy Panh's *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), bears witness to the Cambodian genocide that took place under Pol Pot's regime. It, too, relies on the clash between past and present, as Panh brings two survivors of the genocide and some former guards and torturers from the Khmer Rouge to the S-21 prison site. Panh uses archival documents from the Khmer Rouge regime and other representational strategies, such as former guard Khieu Ches' reenactment of his daily routine while overseeing the S-21, to allow the traumatic past to enter into the present moment. And through animation, Ari Folman's *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) literally illustrates Folman's repressed memories regarding his culpability as a member of the Israeli Defense Forces that were responsible for the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

Other documentary filmmakers have addressed the questions of visibility and invisibility from the perspective of legal justice. Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) uses reenactments of different witness testimonies of a crime scene to point to the ways in which one's personal memories and subjectivity impact legal cases. The highly stylized nature of the reenactments betray the lack of credible witnesses, and what we are left with is a set of recollections about an event that no one saw. In a different vein, documentary filmmaking has enabled the "Forensic Architecture" research team, led by Israeli architect Eyal Weizman, to use architecture as a lens for capturing often unseen or invisible daily violence in areas such as the West Bank or in Syria. As Weizman explains, while forensics has traditionally been used to affirm and solidify state power,

"The direction of the forensic gaze could also be inverted, and used instead to detect and interrupt state violations" (10).

For instance, through a series of interviews with former survivors of the Saydnaya Prison in Syria, the Forensic Architecture team uses architectural and acoustic modeling to reconstruct the prison's architecture based on the prisoners' memories, providing images of a site where no cameras are allowed.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

Persons of Interest and *The Oath* are in dialogue with many of these issues. There is no concrete, visible evidence of the violence suffered by those imprisoned, nor is there a way to visually approximate the mental and emotional toll that detention and deportation has had on the families of the victims. Instead, these films use a set of different representational strategies that bear witness to the experience of imprisonment.

Post-9/11 documentary representation

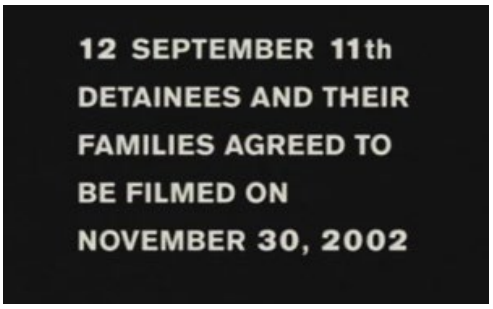
Since its inception, the War on Terror has been conceived of as a war whose success, Vice President Dick Cheney asserted, would hinge on the United States' ability to "work sort of the dark side" and "spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world" (Cheney). Indeed, while the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq have often been marked by moments of spectacle that have circulated across the internet and on television, military efforts have also relied on and benefitted from a limited visual field that leaves much of their actions clandestine. *Persons of Interest* and *The Oath* are but two of several documentaries[2] that have attempted to illuminate this dark side of the War on Terror and have tried to understand exactly what happens to the detainees in the military prison sites where they are held.

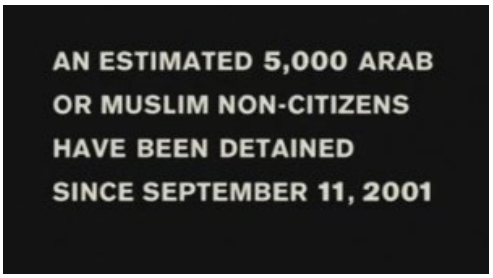
Within this larger corpus, there are multiple documentaries that reveal a preoccupation with the visual nature of torture and imprisonment under the War on Terror and explore the limits of how it can be represented. Some of these documentaries, such as Channel 4's *Torture: The Guantánamo Guidebook* (2005), Michael Winterbottom's *The Road to Guantánamo* (2006), and Errol Morris' *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), engage with these limits by self-consciously revealing what they do not, or cannot, know about what happens within the prison sites. They point to how the opacity of the military prisons enable the torture of detainees and also prevent informed debates regarding the role these prisons play in the War on Terror. Unable to see what goes on inside Guantánamo Bay, *Torture: The Guantánamo Guidebook* simulates the environment of the prison based on declassified United States government documents and military manuals. Volunteers agree to spend 48 hours as detainees in a makeshift prison, subject to a lighter version of the abuse suffered by detainees in Guantánamo Bay. These simulations reenact torture without ever fully capturing the violence and humiliation of the "enhanced interrogation techniques." And as a docudrama, *The Road to Guantánamo* reenacts the torture of the "Tipton Three" in an attempt to both approximate the violence of their imprisonment while also pointing out how this violence is shrouded in secrecy and rarely enters the public visual culture. And focusing on the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, Morris' film *Standard Operating Procedure* is interested in what the Abu Ghraib photos can, and cannot, tell us about the abuse and torture inside the Abu Ghraib prison or of the military milieu and culture that helped enable it.

Other post-9/11 documentary films address the invisibility of Muslims and Arabs who have been unfairly surveilled and/or arrested under the guise of combatting terrorism. These films, like *Persons of Interest* and *The Oath*, offer more expansive definitions and portrayals of Muslims to Western audiences. Two documentaries that address the mass arrests of Arab, Muslim, and Sikh men shortly after September 11 are *Brothers and Others* (Nicolas Rossier, 2003) and *Lest We Forget* (Jason DaSilva, 2003). Like *Persons of Interest*, these documentaries give a voice to those who were unjustly detained by the FBI and Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). *Brothers and Others* also offers an opportunity for victims of the arrest to talk about how the profiling and arrest disrupted their lives and the lives of their loved ones. *Lest We Forget* draws historical parallels between the persecution of Arabs, South Asians, Muslims, and Sikhs after September 11 and the internment of Japanese-American citizens during World War II. By juxtaposing these parallels, the film makes the argument that the national security response to September 11 has perhaps changed in form — from concentration camps to detention centers — but is still rooted in tactics of racial profiling and the revocation of civil liberties.

Persons of Interest

Persons of Interest takes its title from the U.S. government's classification of





people who, after September 11, were suspected to have some link to terrorist activity. Days after the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, the Justice Department cast a wide net in its search for suspects.[3] The mass arrests of individuals – primarily Muslim men – often yielded little to no actionable intelligence. The arrests illustrated the ways that brown South Asian and Middle Eastern bodies were sites upon which national fears and insecurities about terrorism were projected. Markers of difference, such as skin color, accent, nationality, and dress, constructed a hypervisible subject to be vigilantly watched, distracting attention from the violations of human rights and civil liberties of thousands of innocent Middle Eastern and South Asian individuals. This visual dialectic between the extreme visibility of a small set of Muslim men and the invisibility of those who suffered injustice at the hands of federal law enforcement is of central interest in Maclean and Perse's film. The interviews in *Persons of Interest* render its title and the label applied to the interview subjects ironic, as their links to terrorist activities are non-existent, indicative of how little interest they were to U.S. national security.

Spare in its presentation, the documentary consists of twelve interviews of people who were either detained shortly after September 11 or whose family members were detained and, in some cases, deported. While some who were formerly detained are there to talk about their imprisonment, spouses and siblings stand in as proxies for the loved ones of those who were still being held or who had been deported. Others use the interviews to discuss the ways that their imprisonment isolated them from others, leaving them unable to contact their family or their lawyers. The interviews also challenge caricatures and stereotypes about Muslims, simultaneously reaffirming their humanity while also contesting the faulty and racist logic that justified the arrests in the first place.

The documentary navigates a tension between the immediacy of the interview subjects' testimonies and the sheer amount of stories of unlawful detentions that remain untold. Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker argue,

> "When testimony does occur, the presence of a given story sharer... highlights the absence of others who are not, or are no longer, present" (6).

The testimonies in *Persons of Interest* function similarly. Furthermore, the black and white intertitles visually reinforce this interplay between the visible and the invisible. Even the film's title screen is completely black before individual letters of the title begin to appear one by one, replicating the experience of something once invisible becoming visible.

The shadow archive



Ashcroft's honorific white body connotes authority and credibility, constituted in part by the look and speech of bodies like Maclean and Perse's interview subjects.

The film intersperses these talking head testimonies with archival footage of Attorney General John Ashcroft speaking at press conferences or at Congressional testimonies. Much of what Ashcroft says about the scope and the nature of the arrests are directly contradicted by the testimonies in the film, revealing the mendacity of the Bush administration's national security response. Furthermore, Ashcroft's inclusion encourages the viewer to draw comparisons between the privileged speaking position he holds and the positions of the interview subjects. In this context, then, he is a representative of and talking head for the Bush administration. While *Persons of Interest* provides a necessary corrective to the damaging stereotypes circulating about Muslims, the film also uses Ashcroft's presence to encourage viewers to consider the racialized and gendered dynamics inherent in talking head conventions and the ways that certain bodies are imbued with the authority to speak while others are marginalized. The film's testimonies thus contradict many of the statements Ashcroft makes, but his inclusion also lays bare the ideological construction of his authority.



Even the spaces in which Ashcroft speaks – a press conference, the U.S. Mayor's Conference, a U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee – stand in stark contrast to the empty room in which the filmmakers conduct their interviews.

Looking at the ways in which queer mediamakers have used the talking head to bear witness to the AIDS epidemic, Roger Hallas argues that this convention in documentary film has been "deeply implicated in the disciplinary function of dominant media representation" (37). Hallas draws on Allan Sekula's theorization of the shadow archive to explain its implications for the talking head's role as a regulatory mechanism within documentary film. The shadow archive, according to Sekula, is the reservoir of images to which all photographic portraits belong, a "generalized, inclusive *archive*" that "encompasses an entire social terrain while positioning individuals within that terrain" (10). Within this corpus of images, Sekula identifies two opposing, yet related poles: the honorific conventions, linked to bourgeois photographic portraiture, and the repressive conventions linked to the popularization of physiognomy and phrenology amongst law enforcement as a method of determining criminality and classifying criminal bodies. Sekula argues that the meaning of all photographed bodies is produced through the interdependent relationship of these two poles. Hallas contends that we find the correlate of Sekula's honorific subject in the "authoritative figures of the newscaster and the expert witness" and the repressive portrait in the "objectified other of documentary film and television news" (41). The figure of the suspected terrorist, marked by things such as their brown skin, accent, and dress, is in part constructed and constituted by the white, American body, which signifies its belonging to U.S. society in a way that the Middle Eastern or South Asian body cannot.



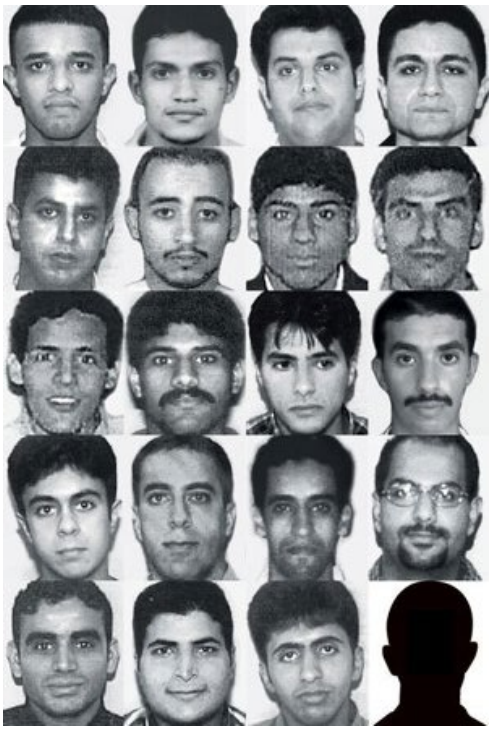
There are no crowds or audiences waiting to hear the interviewees' stories.



At the same time, with no crowd to blend into and nowhere on screen they can hide, the empty room renders them hypervisible. They are solely subjected to the scrutinizing gaze of the camera and viewer.

In terms of September 11, the widely publicized visages of the Muslim hijackers, as well as other imagery such as videos from Muslim-majority countries of people in the streets allegedly celebrating the September 11 attacks, are part of a much larger reservoir of images that pathologize Muslims and Arabs as inherently violent, all of which contributed to a suspicious atmosphere in which anyone who appeared to be Muslim (including many misrecognitions of Sikhs as Muslims) was far more likely to be surveilled or subject to violence and hate crimes. Sunaina Marr Maira argues that after the September 11 attacks, "the media widely publicized the faces of the nineteen Muslim male hijackers" which obscured "the faces of the over 1,500 Muslim men detained by the government in the months following 9/11, without a single proven charge of terrorism" who remained "invisible to the public; their detention was secret and their names were not released until the government was challenged in court" (59). The interviews in *Persons of Interest* challenge dominant depictions of Muslims in the Western media and also offer – to return to Sekula's shadow archive – honorific images of Muslim individuals and families, inviting viewers to consider the invisible ruined lives and futures caused by the arrests.

Furthermore, they allow interviewees a space to give a more nuanced viewpoint on Islam and the challenges the religion faces. The interviewee Syed Ali, for example, points out that the literacy rate amongst the population of 1.1 billion Muslims is slightly under 40%, allowing uneducated religious leaders to hijack the faith and preach perverse, violent interpretations of Islam. Syed points to the very





The 9/11 hijackers[4] in comparison to *Persons of Interest* in the way that it draws on honorific images of Muslim and Arab individuals and families.

real material forces that affect religious beliefs and interpretations, providing a far different perspective than the Islamophobic rhetoric that treats the religion as inherently violent.

Invisibility and imprisonment

Many of these interviews with those who were formerly imprisoned evoke the dual nature of feeling both simultaneously hypervisible and invisible. Practically all interviewees recount the flimsy evidence and justification for the arrests in the first place; Nabil Ayesh, for example, opens the film recounting being pulled over by a police officer and arrested for what amounted to little more than simply being an Israeli Arab. But at the same time, as some interviewees explain, while they are subjected to extreme levels of scrutiny and suspicion, their arrests render them practically invisible. Some interview subjects highlight this invisibility by reenacting their imprisonment. In these moments, the interview room becomes a site of performance, and the spare mise-en-scene visually approximates the sparseness of a prison cell. These reenactments, which I have briefly described in the above visual essay, bring the past into the present and confront viewers with memories for which there is no visible evidence.

In Faiq Medoraj's case, for example, (the evidence for his arrest was that he had pictures of the World Trade Center taped to his deli case at work) the film visually evokes his disappearance into prison with a black intertitle.



While the intertitle is onscreen, Maclean can be heard asking, “Were you charged?” Medoraj responds, “Charged for overstay. That’s what they charged me for.” The use of the intertitle during this exchange visually inscribes multiple sites of absence: the absence of his time and experience of imprisonment, along with the absence of evidence that justified his detention in the first place. The impoverished representations of either interviewee reenactments or of the intertitles point precisely to this lack of evidence and to the flimsy justifications for their arrests.

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Mateen, standing next to his mother Naz as he describes his arrest.



The blocking of Syed in the foreground with his family in the background distances him from his family…



…and as his wife Delilah speaks, Syed is relegated to the background. This has the effect of visually capturing the sense of exclusion the family has experienced.

Family bonds

What is also invisible, *Persons of Interest* shows us, is not only those who disappeared into confinement but how those arrests frayed or destroyed familial and social bonds of the victims and their families. The film places the interviewees within these broader social networks, affirming their identities as spouses, siblings, parents, and relatives rather than as "persons of interest." It also challenges the monolithic images of Muslims circulating in Western media by showing the varied and diverse kinds of families and individuals that were targeted by law enforcement.

For families who luckily remained intact after the arrests, their interviews speak to the feelings of insecurity and precarity regarding their presence in the United States. The interviews provide them with a space with which they can articulate how they have felt victimized and ostracized. In the case of Naz and Mateen Butt, the two discuss their sense of fear after Mateen's arrest and subsequent release. Though Mateen briefly discusses his imprisonment, the general focus of the interview is how it has affected his family's sense of security. Naz offers a narrative of her family achieving the "American Dream," one that has been subverted by her son's arrest:

> "I mean, we just can't thank enough to this country. I mean, we had achieved so much that we couldn't even dream of getting in our country."

Shortly after, Mateen adds,

> "It doesn't seem like it's yours anymore, in ways. I mean, we came here with nothing, and now, little by little, we basically climbed the ladder in ways that we have achieved things. And now, all of a sudden, it's like, just taken from you. Even after I came out, it doesn't feel like whatever is mine is mine anymore because it could be taken from me at any time."

Similarly, the interview with Syed, Delilah, and Carlos Ali also touches on the feeling that they had achieved the "American Dream." As Syed and Delilah explain, however, after Syed's arrest, in which he was charged with helping finance the attacks (based on evidence which included possession of his son's flight simulation video games, of around $200 in foreign currency, of religious books, and of a ticket stub to visit the World Trade Center a month before the attacks) led to a loss of support from friends and family, who abandoned them because, as Delilah explains, "they were so scared of that word ["terrorist"]."

Both of these interviews draw on the American cultural mythology of individual self-sufficiency, of pulling oneself up by their bootstraps. And it is precisely by appealing to this mythos that the interview subjects undercut the ostensible purpose of the mass arrests as a form of protecting the country.

For those who were deported after being arrested, family members appear as representatives of those absent, often bringing photographs of their loved ones with them to function as stand-ins. Within these interviews, the photographs mark the gulf between past and present, in which the often warm, intimate family



Khadra Ali showing photographs of her brother and mother.



Hamzeh begins her interview holding up a photograph of her and her husband…



…before lowering it to turn and walk to her child in a stroller.



photographs signify a lost past. The photographs clash with the harsh, sterile environment of the interview room and not only reference a familial or romantic intimacy that has been destroyed, but also implies that it is potentially no longer attainable. Furthermore, these images provide a different archive than the photos of terrorist faces that have received wider publication. Like the interviews, these photographs position both interviewees and their loved ones within a different social hierarchy, one that confirms their position as family and community members.

In her interview, Khadra Ali discusses the situation of her brother Jama Arab, who faces deportation back to Somalia for violating his visa conditions by traveling, though Ali suspects it was his last name of Arab, and the fact he was born in Yemen, that led to his arrest. She uses these photographs as a way to both represent his absence and also to place him within a larger familial framework. While Ali's photograph visually places her brother in relation to their mother, she also explains how his detainment disrupts their family bonds:

> "I have like three sisters and three brothers, we're all citizens in this United States of America, except my brother."

Ali situates Jama's absence within the realm of the social, but also explains how his arrest and potential deportation disrupt larger family units and structures, while also gesturing to the profound unfairness in targeting him in the first place. But this interview, like others, powerfully makes the case that Jama has other identities outside his last name or his country of birth. He is a son and a sibling, as Ali's photograph and her interview show us.

In other interviews, the children of the deported come to symbolize this loss of family. The separation of parent and child has its own affective power with viewers. For example, Miriam Hamzeh's wordless interview, which lasts only twenty seconds, derives its emotional impact through the use of photographs and children. Hamzeh's interview relies in part on the distance between past and present, in which the photograph of her and her husband hugging each other is what draws attention to his current absence. While we can hear their child in the background while we look at the photograph, the visual shift from seeing the photographed couple to seeing Hamzeh and her child is nonetheless jarring. Her silence during this twenty seconds suggests that the pain of separation exceeds words, and as she turns around and walks over to the stroller, the emotional appeal to viewers comes not only from the absence of her husband, but from the fact that child and parent are separated, too.

The interview with Shokreia Yaghi and her children allows her to effectively, and affectively, attest to the pain and impossible choices she and her family face as a result of her husband's arrest and his deportation to Jordan. The interview is divided into two parts. In the first part, as Yaghi and her children enter the set, she receives a call on her cell phone from her husband. While she walks offscreen to take the call, Maclean and Perse continue to film as the children begin to run around and climb over parts of the set.

Such footage appears to have little to do with the content of Yaghi's interview or in capturing the intensely difficult challenges her family faces. Its power lies in the fact that what we see is an otherwise ordinary moment of children playing. Even during the interview, when one of Yaghi's sons sits next to her, his presence is undeniable.

He fidgets, makes noise, and interrupts Yaghi as she speaks. He sits next to her as she explains the impossible choice she faces: divorce her husband and stay in the United States to raise her children by herself, or leave her home in Albany, New



Yaghi and her son.

York and move to Jordan with her husband to raise the children there. Rhetorically, the presentation of the footage of the children playing, coupled with her son at her side during the interview, draws on the affective power of the separation of Yaghi's husband from his children as well as the possibility of her eventual separation from them.

In capturing the disparate stories of those whose lives have been disrupted by the mass arrests, the film ends with footage of an informal meal prior to all of the interviewees posing for a formal picture together. The footage of the interviewees casually chatting and eating, breaking the fast of Ramadan, serves a similar function as the shots of Yaghi's children playing, in that both confirm the basic humanity of those in attendance. Much like the photographs and interviews we have just previously seen, the meal and the gathering place the interview subjects within a wider community.







The formal photograph at the end freezes a moment in time that the film then uses for its epilogue. After displaying the photo of the group for several seconds, it then cuts to close-ups of all of the subjects in the photograph with overlaid white text that explains what has happened to them since the interview. Some have been cleared of all charges, some remain in legal limbo, and others have been deported or left the United States. By ending with this photograph, *Persons of Interest* engenders one last reflection on the dialectical relationship between the past and present. By its very nature, the epilogue marks a passage of time and an elision of events that have transpired since the documentary was filmed. It is in this elision that the film continues to remind viewers of the on-going and daily struggles of those subject to incarceration and detention as part of the United States anti-terrorism efforts.

The Oath

While *Persons of Interest* uses interview testimonies and plays with talking head conventions in order to highlight the unjust nature of the mass arrests and racial profiling of Muslim and Arabs, Laura Poitras' *The Oath* focuses on two men: Abu Jandal, the former bodyguard for Osama bin Laden, and his brother-in-law Salim Hamdan, who was bin Laden's driver, a Guantánamo Bay prisoner, and the plaintiff in the Supreme Court case *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*.[5] [open endnotes in new window] The film follows Jandal's daily life as he raises his son, drives a taxi cab for a living, provides religious instruction for youths curious about Islam and jihad, and also expresses deep regret for recruiting Hamdan to Al-Qaeda. It also documents Hamdan's trial at a Guantánamo Bay military commission for charges of providing material support for terrorism and engaging in a conspiracy to



The unstable flickering and grainy image of Hamdan's image metaphorizes his disappearance in Guantánamo Bay and his distance from his family and from us as viewers.



As the interrogation footage in the opening scene ends, this intertitle appears. Like in *Persons of Interest*, the intertitle here suggests an ellipsis of space, body, and time, as if Hamdan's imprisonment in Guantánamo Bay has left him practically invisible.



Identification of Abu Jandal is delayed until a few scenes after we first see him.

commit terrorism for allegedly transporting supplies and weapons as bin Laden's driver. As we come to find, Jandal and Hamdan's stories are far more intertwined than they may initially appear. Looking at these stories through the lens of visibility and invisibility, as well as through Jandal's presence and Hamdan's absence in the film, enables us to consider how *The Oath* uses these visual dynamics to criticize the War on Terror's overarching penal and legal structures.

The initial introductions to Hamdan and Jandal establish the viewer's unequal visual relationship to the two; Hamdan is a perpetually absent, spectral figure while Jandal, as a counterweight, has a commanding presence in front of the camera. Together, both stories have a mutually constitutive relationship. For Hamdan, his disappearance into the secretive and opaque space of the Guantánamo Bay prison takes on greater significance as we learn more about Jandal's culpability in Hamdan's imprisonment, specifically when it is revealed that Jandal was questioned by the FBI shortly after the September 11 attacks (which I discuss at further length below). The freedom Jandal enjoys throughout the film raises a set of questions concerning the use of an alternative set of tactics and interrogation methods for dealing with alleged terrorists, which stand in stark contrast to the often counterproductive tactics of the War on Terror.

We learn little about Hamdan through the course of the film, with occasional descriptions of him given to us by his lawyers or by Jandal. In part, this is because Hamdan could not be interviewed while at Guantánamo Bay, and after his release, has refused media interviews. Hamdan's visual absence from the film and his inability to speak for himself in front of the camera is meant to highlight the secrecy of the Guantánamo Bay prison system. By opening with the footage of his apprehension and arrest in Afghanistan in 2001 (seen earlier in the visual essay), the film consciously draws attention to his absence throughout. One of the challenges the film offers the viewer is to consider whether or not what we learn about Hamdan is ever justification for his indefinite detention.

Jandal's treatment by *The Oath* is noticeably different. The first time we see him, he is seated on a couch in his home next to his son Habib as the two look at a photograph of Jandal and Hamdan posing together and a photograph of Habib as a baby. This scene raises a few issues that recur throughout the film, namely, Hamdan's disappearance and Jandal's complicated and split identity as both doting father and militant fighter. Habib tells him that when he grows up, he wants to be a "jihadist," further explaining "like you." In some ways, the moment is entirely normal – a young child tells his father that he wants to be like him when he grows up. And indeed, Poitras avoids oversimplifying Jandal's identity as a former member of al-Qaeda, and it is not even until the next scene, when we see Jandal driving his taxi, that any onscreen texts indicates who he is.

Two divergent paths

By way of these divergent introductions, *The Oath* challenges the assumptions made about and the depictions of terrorists and terrorism. The often static and monolithic beliefs about terrorists are referenced early in the film. At one point, we see archival footage of a 2006 episode of CBS' *60 Minutes*, in which Michael Scheuer, former CIA Intelligence Officer and Chief of the CIA's bin Laden Unit

from 1996-1999, declares that if it were up to him, Jandal would be locked up because "anyone who is as dedicated as he is, we ought to be taking care of him one way or another." Likewise, Hamdan's lawyer, Lieutenant Commander Brian Mizer, explains at a meeting for families of Guantánamo Bay prisoners that

> "Americans, and particularly the American government, cannot understand how bin Laden had farmers, had mechanics, had cooks. They see Mr. Hamdan standing next to bin Laden, and so therefore he must be a terrorist."

Both examples highlight the tendency with which assumptions about terrorism or terrorist associations tend to reduce individuals to violent ideologues.

Contra Scheuer's remarks, Jandal is a much more complex and slippery figure than one may assume, and by capturing this complexity, Poitras makes an effective case against the tendency to treat the terms "terrorism" or "terrorist" as static or catch-all. In part, the film humanizes Jandal by capturing what are otherwise invisible moments of his daily life, such as when he is driving his taxi cab, or when we see him preparing his son for school or instructing him in religious practice. At other moments, we watch Jandal as he provides religious instruction to young men. Most interestingly, these meetings display the layered and conflicted thoughts Jandal appears to have about his relationship to jihad and Al-Qaeda. The manner by which he depicts his own time in Al-Qaeda is never straightforward, and the film never tries to prejudice us one way or the other. It avoids attempting to give us a clear and concise narrative of his time as bin Laden's bodyguard and allows Jandal to speak for himself, though, as we learn, he is often contradictory and evasive in how he recounts his time as a member of Al-Qaeda or what his current relationship to the organization is. For example, when Poitras asks Jandal if he would have participated in the September 11 attacks had he not been imprisoned in Yemen at the time, he explains that he would not because he prefers to "confront them on the battlefield, soldier to soldier." The next day, however, he is filmed demanding that yesterday's remark be deleted from the record. While one can read moments such as these as justifiable examples of why Jandal is an untrustworthy narrator, they also reveal his own seeming internal struggle with his relationship to Al-Qaeda and his sensitivity to his image and how he is perceived.



Johnson's camera is static as she records the landscape, and this lack of movement elicits a feeling of tranquility, particularly in her shots of the sky and the Guantánamo Bay horizon.

Representing Guantánamo and military tribunals

Hamdan's absence is also a way for *The Oath* to highlight the structures of invisibility that govern both the Guantánamo Bay prison and the military commission trial. While Poitras was in Yemen interviewing Jandal, cinematographer Kirsten Johnson went to Guantánamo Bay to film Hamdan's trial. However, Johnson was neither allowed to film the trial nor interview Hamdan, and so she uses of haunting portraits of the Guantánamo Bay landscape as a substitute for his absent body.[6] These compositions often vacillate between the peaceful and the foreboding and haunting, sometimes in the same shot.

This is not an exposé into the Guantánamo Bay prison. Johnson's shots focus on



Even the shots of the prison are often taken at angles that obscure or prevent it from fully dominating the frame, ultimately rendering it non-descript, as if they were simply generic buildings.

exteriors and surfaces, which suggest a feeling in which there is knowledge of the violence committed against those imprisoned that cannot be recorded. Indeed, as Johnson herself has said,

> "With each composition, I worked to make a frame that would indicate an environment where it was possible to see and yet meaning was still hidden" (356).

During many of these shots, the film's sound design further articulates Hamdan's absence; letters he has written are read by an actor against the backdrops of Johnson's landscapes, a further displacement of his body.[7]

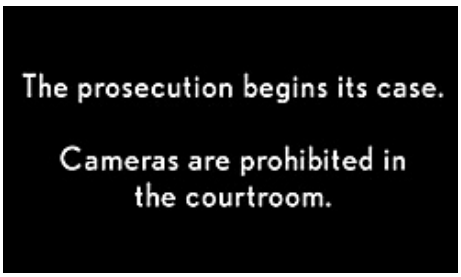


"I have not been permitted to see the sun, or hear people outside the house, or talk with other people. I am alone, and I do not talk with anyone in my cell, because there is no one else to talk to."

By pushing the prison to the periphery of these compositions, Johnson's cinematography also visually articulates Guantánamo Bay's, and Hamdan's, uncertain and liminal legal status. Often referred to as a "legal black hole," the questions surrounding Guantánamo Bay's legality are suffused with spatial and visual language. Amy Kaplan's essay "Where Is Guantánamo?" wonders not about the prison's physical location, but rather where it can located in terms of legal jurisdiction:

> "The question and answer, however, do not thereby remap Guantánamo as a space inside the law, but as an *indefinite legal borderland* between the domestic and the foreign" (847, emphasis mine).[8]

The military commission trial itself renders Hamdan as invisible as the prison, and Johnson's cinematography illustrates how the prison and the courtroom's opacity are intertwined.[9] Hamdan is not visible as a prisoner, and, as the film shows us, he is not visible as a legal subject.



The film substitutes a series of intertitles for footage of the legal proceedings that they are not allowed to film. Like Medoraj's intertitle in *Persons of Interest*, this intertitle visualizes several different kinds of absence: absence of evidence, absence of



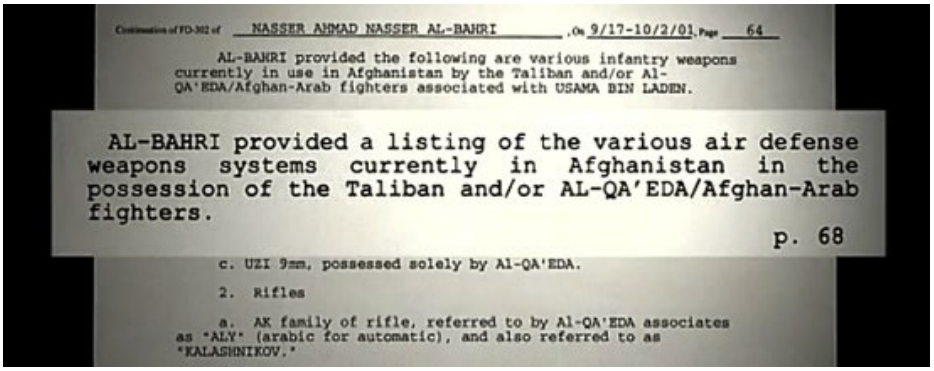
Journalists take video footage and pictures of some of Janet Hamlin's courtroom sketches that are pinned to a bulletin board. The scene appears peculiar in part because the camcorders and cameras are expected to capture "real life" (the indexical

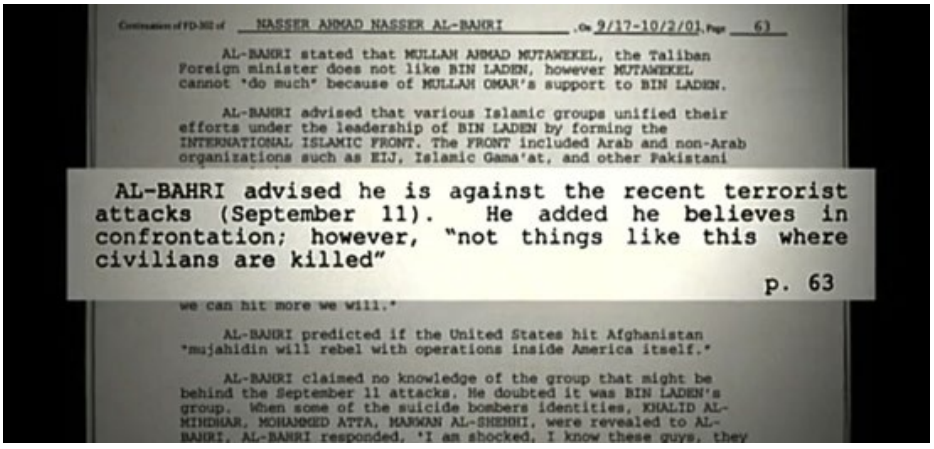
a fair trial, as well as absence of Hamdan's own agency as a defendant.

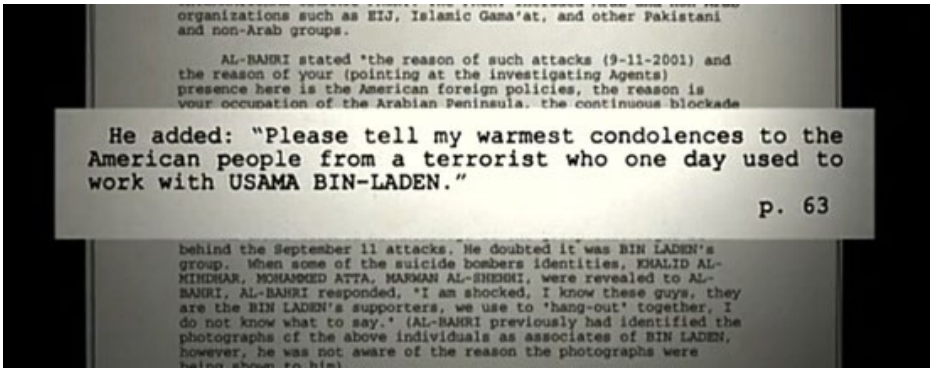
image), but in this case, they are recording a medium that has no indexical qualities.

Persuasive and coercive interrogations

The dueling stories of Jandal and Hamdan, in which Jandal moves freely through Yemen while Hamdan is perpetually absent, draw a contrast between two different styles of interrogations: the persuasive tactics centered on emotional and interpersonal strategies for obtaining intelligence and the coercive methods of "enhanced interrogation" – torture and indefinite detention – allowed under the War on Terror. As we learn, these different interrogation styles produce vastly different outcomes for both men. Poitras waits until late in the film to reveal that Jandal was imprisoned in Yemen for his suspected involvement in the Al-Qaeda bombing of the U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer USS *Cole* in October 2000. While in prison, he was questioned by the FBI shortly after the September 11 attacks. Poitras includes footage of FBI interrogator Ali Soufan, who interrogated Jandal in Yemen, as he explains to the United States Senate Judiciary Committee how well the persuasive interrogation techniques worked on Jandal. Though Jandal downplays the interrogation in an interview with Poitras, claiming that he only provided the FBI with information that was already well-known, the interrogation documents tell a different story. The film cuts to the archival documents, revealing the treasure trove of information about Al-Qaeda that Jandal provided his interrogators. It is also from these documents that we learn Jandal provided the authorities with Hamdan's name.







What are we to make of this late reveal? Of course, it reframes how we have interpreted much of what Jandal has previously said. Not only does it shift how we read his feelings of guilt about Hamdan's imprisonment, but the documents also reveal Jandal's different attitude toward Al-Qaeda and the September 11 attacks. According to the FBI interrogation notes, Jandal expressed shock and condemnation upon learning of the attacks, after which he provided intelligence regarding everything he knew about Al-Qaeda. These documents are, then, a testament to the effectiveness of the persuasive interrogation methods.

These revelations also encourage the viewer to compare the ways in which the Yemeni government addressed Jandal's violent extremism in a far different manner than the United States' government addressed Hamdan's far less extreme involvement with Al-Qaeda. We learn that Jandal is out of prison after agreeing to the Yemeni re-education program known as The Dialogue Committee, which uses religious instruction and discussion to convince former militants to refrain from committing violent acts in Yemen or killing foreigners. The Yemeni government also provided Jandal with the money to purchase a taxi in order to help him re-integrate into society.

After we learn this information, *The Oath* returns to the verdict of Hamdan's trial, thereby juxtaposing their two outcomes. Hamdan is found not guilty of the most serious charge of conspiracy to commit terrorism, but is found guilty of providing material support for terrorism (a charge created by the United States Congress specifically for Hamdan's trial) and is sentenced to time served, plus five months, ultimately considered a loss for the United States government in its first military commission trial. The anticlimactic end to the trial does little to vindicate the coercive methods of interrogation and detention under the War on Terror and we are given no sense that Hamdan's suffering has in any way aided in the prevention of future terrorist attacks. Through their intertwined stories, and by juxtaposing Jandal's presence with Hamdan's absence, the film encourages viewers to consider alternative and more humane ways for gathering intelligence.

The end of the film returns us to the dialectic of presence and absence with which it began. One shot in particular emphasizes Hamdan's continued absence and reclusiveness:



A black intertitle with white text reads “Salim Hamdan was reunited with his family on January 8, 2009” and cuts to a nighttime shot of an exterior of a house. The suggestion here is that the house is Hamdan’s, though it is impossible to know, as the film cuts to another intertitle that states,

> “He has refused to be filmed or speak to the media since his release.”

There is another cut to a black screen, and Poitras can be heard asking Jandal, “Is Salim the same person you left seven years ago?” Jandal explains how Hamdan’s reclusiveness since his release from prison is a direct result from of the years he spent in solitary confinement. The return to Jandal is in some ways ironic, as the man who provides viewers with the final word on Hamdan’s condition since leaving prison is also the one who is directly responsible for his imprisonment in the first place. To have Jandal explain the mental and emotional changes Hamdan has experienced since his imprisonment allows viewers to reflect one last time on the policies that led to the physical pain and torture that has left him so reclusive.

Conclusion

Nicholas Mirzoeff’s phrase “banality of images” refers to the saturation of war imagery in media outlets, a “deliberate effort by those fighting the war to reduce its visual impact by saturating our senses with non-stop indistinguishable and undistinguished images” (14). But while there has been an abundance of images in the United States media showcasing American military might, there is far less circulation of images of the suffering it has caused. If the affective impact of our contemporary military conflicts has been blunted by an overabundance of war imagery in the media, both *Persons of Interest* and *The Oath* point to ways in which documentary filmmakers can denaturalize the War on Terror’s visual culture by drawing attention to what often remains invisible to us. For the apparent saturation of images from the front line, these films remind us that this view of war is an artificial construction, one whose contours are shaped by what remains invisible and out of the public eye. By focusing on the presence and absence of certain bodies from our view, and how these bodies are rendered visible and invisible, these documentaries highlight the ways in which the carceral policies enacted under the guise of combating terrorism benefit from a lack of visibility, thereby making their impact on physical bodies unseen.

Persons of Interest allows interview subjects to discuss their experiences of imprisonment as well as show viewers the families that are collateral damage of the post-9/11 mass arrests. *The Oath*, on the other hand, uses the “non-space” of Guantánamo Bay and the secrecy surrounding the military tribunal of Salim

Hamdan to make visible the obscurity in which prisoners of the War on Terror are forced to live. It also compels viewers to consider how Jandal's presence in the film both complicates the stereotypes one may hold about those associated with Al-Qaeda as well consider alternate ways of addressing violence and extremism through means other than indefinite detention. The modes of representation in these documentaries – and the failures of those representations – speak powerfully about those have been imprisoned under the War on Terror and those who remain missing as a result of its policies. They furthermore productively highlight ways to both demystify the visuality of the War on Terror and turn it back against itself.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

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1. The videos about this process can be accessed here: http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/saydnaya/ [return to page 1]

2 For a longer discussion of documentaries that address torture under the War on Terror, see Lesage, Julia. "Torture Documentaries." *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 51 (Spring 2009). http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/TortureDocumentaries/.

3. In doing so, lawyer Rachel Meeropol notes that it "require[d] law enforcement to hold – by any means necessary – individuals suspected of having any link to terrorism, be it tenuous or totally unsupported, even if it meant enforcing immigration laws in a much stricter manner than is typical" (146).

4. This image appears here: http://nymag.com/news/9-11/10th-anniversary/hijackers/

5. The United States Supreme Court case *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* ruled that the military commissions established by the Bush administration violated the Uniform Code of Military Justice and Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions. [return to page 2]

6. Regarding Hamdan's absence, Poitras has remarked "I feel okay (perhaps good) that you never see him because that is the situation with many of those still imprisoned" (qtd. in Ratner 16).

7. The voice without visible source is what Michel Chion refers to as the acousmêtre, "the situation in which we don't see the person we hear, as his voice comes from the center of the image, the same source of all the film's other sounds" (9). Chion argues that "[f]or the spectator, the filmic acousmêtre is 'offscreen,' outside the image, and at the same time in the image," further noting that "[i]t's as if the voice were wandering along the surface, *at once inside and outside*, seeking a place to settle" (23). This liminal space Chion describes evokes the spectral qualities of Hamdan's presence in the film.

8. Along similar lines, the geographer Derek Gregory argues that "[t]hrough this contorted legal geographing, Guantánamo was *outside* the United States in order to foreclose *habeas corpus* petitions from prisoners held there and *inside* the United States in order to forestall prosecutions for torturing them" (215-216, emphasis original).

9. The Guantánamo military commissions operate by different rules than standard U.S. civilian trials, including requiring only two-thirds of a jury to agree on a conviction instead of the standard unanimous agreement, allowing evidence obtained by torture, as well as the admissibility of secret evidence to which the defense does not have access. Part of the way that *The Oath* criticizes the inherent flaws of the military commissions system is, again, through its attempt, and failure, to represent Hamdan as a legal subject.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Anti-gravity: *Interstellar* and the fictional betrayal of place

by Todd McGowan



Interstellar shows our dislocation from place by imagining a catastrophe that renders Earth uninhabitable. Dust storms become commonplace in a world where food can no longer grow.



Murph is the character most invested in the fiction, and this makes her the film's hero. Her belief in the fiction of a possible solution leads to an actual solution.



Hegel insists that our ethical being stems from

One of the basic truths of modern science is that there will come a time when humans will no longer be able to inhabit the Earth. Either the Sun will cease to provide heat and light, the Earth will no longer grow food, a meteor will eliminate breathable air, or some other calamity will portend the end of humanity on Earth. Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* (2014) addresses one of these scenarios with a portrait of humanity on the verge of extinction. In doing so, the film confronts one of the pivotal questions that philosophy has engaged since the birth of modern science: What is the subject's relation to its place? *Interstellar* envisions the possibility of an emancipation from Earth and thus from place, and this depiction of emancipation gives the film a philosophical significance that is not immediately apparent.

Science fiction shares with philosophy a speculative basis, which is undoubtedly why science fiction films commonly intervene on philosophical questions. Though there are science fiction films that don't really concern themselves with such questions, the genre as such tends in this direction. The speculative basis of science fiction leads directors like Nolan, whether they aim to or not, to wade into philosophical waters. Though Nolan indicates in his discussions of the film he has much more personal interest in the science of *Interstellar* than its philosophical implications, he nonetheless pushes the film in a direction that raises issues that he may have not intended to confront explicitly.

As a result, making sense of the film's implications requires grasping its philosophical rather than simply its narrative trajectory. *Interstellar* shows that the place in which we are situated is confining and constraining; as a result, we must try to free ourselves from our rootedness in a place. But our inherent attachment to our rootedness renders this freedom almost impossible to achieve or even to imagine. The film must depict the path to freedom: it centers around the apparent impossibility of humanity's escaping Earth to live elsewhere. Yet it also shows that to achieve this impossibility requires constructing a fiction—the fiction that the impossible is actually possible. The characters in *Interstellar* who cling to the fiction and invest themselves in it are able accomplish the impossible by transcending the limits of space and time. And the film presents this as an ethical contrast with those who attempt to take up a position outside of any fiction and to refuse its distortion.

Within the film, fictional distortion is not a retreat from reality but a way to engage in its transformation. In this way, the film takes up an ethical position linked to that of Hegel, who rejects the purity of Kant's morality for the sake of adhering to a distorting fiction. One must embrace one's distorted perspective rather than trying to eliminate the distortion. If participation in a fiction defines the ethics that the film advocates, the ultimate ethical position is that of the interpreter. Indeed, the film concludes by advocating interpretation as an emancipatory act that finally frees the characters from place. By taking up this critique of place, *Interstellar* aligns itself firmly on one side of a philosophical

our ability to detach ourselves from our place. Our alienation is inextricable from our ability to act ethically.

struggle that runs through the history of Western thought but comes to a head in the contrasting philosophies of Martin Heidegger and Hegel.

Kein Blut und *Kein Boden*



On the question of place, Martin Heidegger is Hegel's philosophical antagonist. Heidegger ties our authenticity as beings to our rootedness in a specific place.

The fundamental disagreement between Heidegger and Hegel comes down to the status that each accords to place. For Heidegger, the disaster of modernity occurs through the loss of our rootedness in place. The great metaphysical error that modernity doubles down on is that it considers beings without regard to their place. We think of objects theoretically as present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) rather than in the act of using them or as ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*). As Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*,

> "In the 'physical' assertion that 'the hammer is heavy' we *overlook* not only the tool-character of the entity we encounter, but also something that belongs to any ready-to-hand equipment: its place. Its place becomes a matter of indifference."[1] [open endnotes in new window]

The danger of the failure to understand place isn't just that we won't properly conceive the hammer but that we will forget ourselves how to dwell on Earth.[2] Place is constitutive for objects and for us, and without a sense of place, we are simply cast adrift.

Hegel has a much less sanguine view of place. In Hegel's thought, place is a natural, contingent determination that one must leave behind. Through distancing oneself from one's place, one becomes estranged but in the process gains freedom.[3] In short, estrangement from place is the price of freedom. As a consequence of this idea, Hegel celebrates the modern failure to dwell rather than lamenting it in the way that Heidegger does. Dwelling may provide a sense of rootedness, but this rootedness is the emblem of a complete unfreedom. And unfreedom is not the end of the story for the subject. Unlike the stone that simply is where it is, the subject has the capacity to emancipate itself from its place; this emancipation occurs through its ability to distinguish itself as free from its place. The subject can gain freedom from rootedness by constructing a fiction that inaugurates the break from it. This freedom must initially be fictional because the subject is tied to its place. The subject exists in a context, but it constructs a fiction of itself as independent from this context and thus autonomous.[4] Without constructing a fiction of freedom, no actual freedom is possible, and this is why Hegel argues for the primacy of the false in relation to the true.



Heidegger viewed space travel as a sign of the danger that technology posed to our ability to dwell on Earth. Hegel, in contrast, would undoubtedly have embraced it as evidence of the productivity of our alienation.

In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel details the central role that the fiction—what he calls there the false—plays in the project of creating distinctions. Without an initial fiction that creates a distinction where none otherwise exists, we would have nothing to know and would remain the prisoners of place. As Hegel puts it,

> "To know something falsely means that there is a disparity between knowledge and its Substance. But this very disparity is the process of distinguishing in general, which is an essential moment [in knowing]."[5]



It is a fiction that makes space travel possible in the first place because a fiction breaks our initial tie to our place.

Without the fictional creation of distinctions, there is no knowledge at all, and this leads Hegel to see the logical priority that the false has relative to the true. The fiction is the origin of freedom, and freedom is always freedom from place.

Though all of Christopher Nolan's films address the priority of the fiction and thus situate themselves within Hegel's line of thought, *Interstellar* (2014) is the first to illustrate the fiction's uprooting power, its role in emancipating the subject from its place. The film depicts a future Earth devastated by blight and on the verge of being unable to sustain human life. The loss of food sources portends humanity's



Cooper drives to a secret NASA base, where scientists are preparing to travel to a wormhole in order to find a new world for humanity to inhabit. His future self directed him to go here.



It is future humanity that opens the wormhole that the NASA scientists discover. The future act retroactively creates the conditions of its possibility.



The wormhole that the astronauts traverse in order to save Earth could not exist according to the rules of normal temporal causality.



Professor Brand constructs the fiction of saving humanity, and it is this fiction that drives the space mission that sends astronauts through the wormhole.

extinction. Against this backdrop, Nolan focuses on a former pilot, Cooper (Matthew McConaughey), who discovers a secret NASA base where plans are underway to rescue humanity by leaving the planet rather than conserving it.[6] Cooper pilots the spaceship that seeks out a habitable planet in another galaxy accessible through a wormhole located near Saturn. Dr. Amelia Brand (Anne Hathaway), Romilly (David Gyasi), and Doyle (Wes Bentley) accompany him, along with two robots, TARS and CASE. The key to the film lies in the identity of the creators of the wormhole and in humanity's fictional response to this opening that makes the voyage through it possible.

When Cooper first hears about the wormhole at NASA from Professor Brand (Michael Caine), the father of Dr. Brand, Professor Brand cannot provide any details about its origin. He tells Cooper that NASA assumes that some alien beings —entities he labels "they"—have put it there for the purpose of saving humanity. But subsequently the film reveals that the wormhole is not the creation of an alien race or of some deity looking out for us but the creation of future humanity. Here, Nolan plays out the most important idea from Hegel's philosophy: the otherness of the beyond is never beyond but always part of the subject's own self-displacement. In fact, the task of philosophy, as Hegel sees it, involves tracing the different figures of the beyond as they move closer to the subject. The gap in which the subject envisions the beyond is a gap within subjectivity itself. This is not to say that otherness does not exist. Instead, the implication is that one cannot await salvation from the beyond but recognize how one gives possibilities to oneself. The situation for revolutionary change comes from the agent for revolutionary change, which means that this agent cannot wait for a propitious situation but must create that situation through her or his own act.[7] Hegel's conception of change sheds light on *Interstellar*'s paradoxical narrative structure and reveals its appropriateness.

The possibility for change comes from the subject's own self-displacement (from his/her own future), but in order to take up this possibility and break from its rootedness, the subject must respond to possibility with by creating a fiction. This is the initial transformative act, according to *Interstellar*. If one approaches the possibility directly, it would seem impossible because it portends the destruction of the symbolic world that the subject inhabits. No one would agree to this destruction without a fiction that would make it palatable. The possibility—the wormhole, in the case of *Interstellar*—requires constructing a fiction in order to orient desire toward it.

Professor Brand is the author of the fiction that orients desire toward the possibility that the wormhole offers. Brand, who is the chief researcher for a reconstituted NASA, heads a team of scientists attempting to save humanity through relocation from Earth. In order to do so, he devises two plans for saving humanity. Plan A involves solving the problem of gravity and using it for propulsion in order to transport all of humanity through the wormhole to another habitable planet, while Plan B sends a small group through the wormhole to populate the new planet with embryos designed to recreate humanity while abandoning the rest of humanity to die on an Earth devastated from blight. Plan B saves the species while sacrificing all existent individuals of the species, which makes it a much less appealing option for the participants. Without the idea of Plan A, they would refuse to sign up for the project. Plan A is not just, as Professor Brand says, "a lot more fun." It is also the sine qua non for participation in the project, which Professor Brand himself recognizes, which is why he keeps the non-existence of Plan A secret.[8]

On his deathbed, Professor Brand reveals to Cooper's daughter Murph (Jessica Chastain) that there is no Plan A. He soon realized that he could not solve the problem of gravity and enable all of humanity to escape. He continued his research while knowing that it was in vain because he understood that humanity needed the fiction of individual survival in order to work toward the survival of



Though Professor Brand creates the noble lie that saves humanity, his failure to believe his own lie renders him one of the film's villains.



When Professor Brand confesses his dishonesty to Murph on his deathbed, she recognizes that all their work has been a fraud.



Professor Brand excludes himself from his own theorizations. For the film, this is the gravest ethical error.

the species. As the film presents it, only Professor Brand and Dr. Mann (Matt Damon), a scientist who went on the original mission seeking out a habitable planet, know that Plan A is a fiction. One might imagine that the film portrays them heroically for taking up the burden of knowing the fiction, but they end up receiving a near-total condemnation for how they comport themselves relative to the fiction.

The film does not condemn Professor Brand for his lie about Plan A—the lie is necessary to create a desire for the interstellar voyage—but for his failure to believe in it. He treats the lie cynically, and this cynicism earns him Murph's condemnation and ultimately that of the film itself. As the author of the lie, Professor Brand adopts a position that sees through it and grasps the hard truth that the lie obscures—the sacrifice of everyone alive on Earth. He believes that he alone is capable of thinking beyond his own individuality and "as a species." In a conversation with Murph just before the professor's death, Professor Brand's laments humanity's inability to think like he can, and yet his supposed exceptionality is what makes him a reprehensible figure.

Professor Brand's favorite poem—"Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" by Dylan Thomas—becomes ironic given his sacrificing all humanity living on Earth. The poem seems to have a solemn importance in the film. When the astronauts leave Earth orbit, Professor Brands narrates the poem's most famous lines. He says, "Do not go gentle into that good night; / Old age should burn and rage at close of day. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light." But even as he says these words, Professor Brand has accepted "the dying of the light" for Earth's populace.

The difference between Murph, the film's hero, and Professor Brand is not that Murph reveals the lie while Professor Brand hides it. It is rather that Murph takes the lie as the path to truth rather than just accepting it as a lie. Just after she discovers the lie, her partner Getty (Topher Grace) asks her if she is going to reveal it to the public. Murph responds negatively out of fear of massive panic, and Getty accuses her of being just like Professor Brand, whom she detests. Murph then articulates the difference. She says, "Brand gave up on us. I'm still trying to solve this." Confronted with the impossible that only a fiction can circumvent, Murph sees a possibility in the fiction even though she understands its fictitiousness; in this way, she separates herself from the cynicism of Professor Brand. This is the ethical position that *Interstellar* advances.



Murph is the ethical center of the film because she insists on pursuing the fiction.



The different relationships that Murph and Professor Brand take up to the fiction differentiate them. Murph's breakthrough stems from her belief.

The test of impurity

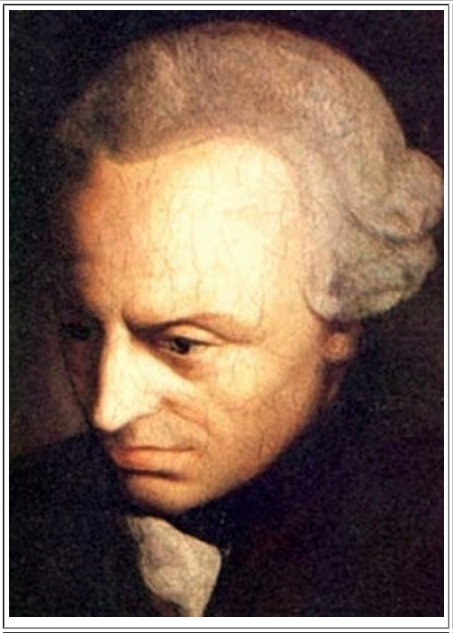
If the fiction is necessary for the subject to emerge out of its place, there is no possibility of a pure subject. The subject depends on a structuring deceit in order to become a subject and separate itself from its context. That is to say, impurity is constitutive for the subject, and this impurity manifests itself whenever the subject acts. The subject's desire will inflect each decision that it makes. Recognizing the necessity of this fundamental impurity is what Hegel calls the absolute, a recognition of the role that the distortion of desire plays in all knowledge and action. The absolute isn't the overcoming of all distortion and the attainment of a pure knowledge, as most think, but the conclusion that the



The film often repeats Professor Brand's favorite poem by Dylan Thomas—"Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." But we see Brand himself betraying the idea of the poem, even as he recites it.

obstacle acting as a barrier to one's knowledge is simultaneously the condition of possibility for that knowledge.

There is no neutral knowledge or action because the distortion of desire informs the very origin of the subject who knows and acts. The subject strives to get beyond the barrier of this distortion, and yet this barrier is itself the source of the striving. Philosophies of infinite striving, like those of Kant and Fichte, fail to account for the role that the distortion of desire plays in inaugurating the subject's striving to overcome that distortion. This is why the recognition of the necessity of the distortion is absolute.[9]



Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy imagines that one must strive to overcome the distortions in one's desire, but he doesn't recognize that these distortions constitute the very possibility of morality.



J. G. Fichte developed Kant's morality and made infinite striving the center of his philosophical project. The Hegelian morality of *Interstellar* takes a position opposed to both Kant and Fichte.



Dr. Mann is one of the only two characters to know the truth about Plan A, and at the same

In one sense, Professor Brand understands the necessity of the distortion of desire when he constructs the fiction. He knows that no one will devote themselves to Plan B without the fiction of Plan A and its illusory promise. But his great failure resides in his inability to apply this understanding to himself. He places himself in the position of pure neutrality looking on the survival of humanity without regard for his own desire. He assumes, along with Dr. Mann, that he can act on behalf of the universal without the recourse to his own individual desire. Professor Brand and Dr. Mann believe in their own purity, but Dr. Mann's actions when he finds himself marooned on a desolate planet give the lie to this self-image and reveal

time, he is the film's clearest villain.



Dr. Mann tries to kill Cooper and strand Dr. Brand on the planet in order to cover up his treachery.



Dr. Mann's own survival is more important to him than the future of humanity, though he presents himself as a self-sacrificing subject.

the impossibility of any neutral universality untainted by the individual functioning as the vehicle for that universality.

Nolan initially establishes Dr. Mann as an irreproachable subject, an exemplar of humanity. During the voyage, Dr. Brand describes Dr. Mann to Cooper as the most ethical and intelligent human being. But when the *Endurance* finally arrives at the planet where Mann has landed, his impurity soon comes into view. Instead of showing himself to be "the best of us," he acts like the worst. He signaled back to Earth that he had discovered a viable planet when in fact he had landed on a frozen wasteland that could not sustain human life. He did this just to give himself a chance of being rescued. Rather than sacrifice himself for the sake of humanity's survival, Mann has put humanity's existence in peril just for the chance to preserve his own life, as becomes apparent during his interaction with the other astronauts. Even though he propelled himself into the void of space with only a small chance of surviving, he tells Cooper when they are alone, "I never really considered the possibility that my planet wasn't the one." His desire inflects his universalism and renders it completely pathological. When he and Cooper go together to explore the supposedly habitable surface of the planet, Mann tries to kill Cooper in order to cover up his crime.

After he breaks Cooper's helmet and leaves him to die from breathing the planet's poisonous atmosphere, Mann walks away, unable to watch the suffering that he has inflicted. Not only does Dr. Mann endanger the survival of humanity to save himself, but he also can't even look at Cooper as Cooper dies, thereby fully earning the appellation "coward" that Cooper applies to him. But Mann nonetheless wants to comfort Cooper, so he tells him that he will continue to talk so that Cooper will not have to die alone. Dr. Mann then begins to recite the Dylan Thomas poem that Professor Brand narrated to the *Endurance* crew as they left Earth. This is also the poem that Professor Brand cites as he dies just prior to Dr. Mann's treachery with Cooper.

When Dr. Mann has recourse to this seemingly defiant and even heroic lyric, the status of this poem undergoes a dramatic shift that began to become visible on Professor Brand's deathbed. The film reveals the significance of the poem formally through its placement within the narrative structure. Instead of being a plea for struggling to survive and refusing to accept death, it becomes a means for avoiding the trauma that one has inflicted. Dr. Mann's recitation of the poem retroactively transforms the spectator's understanding of the poem's significance when spoken by Professor Brand and completes the spectator's revaluation of the latter. **(22)**



As Cooper suffocates from the planet's poisonous air, Dr. Mann recites "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" to him, which aligns Dr. Mann with Professor Brand and changes the significance of that poem in the film.



The poem "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" becomes a sign of the corruption of the character speaking it. This becomes clear through Dr. Mann's use of the poem as a salve to his own conscience while murdering Cooper.

During its first appearance in the film, Professor Brand uses the poem to give the astronauts courage for their difficult journey. But when Dr. Mann employs this same poem as he leaves Cooper to die on a hostile planet, its role becomes clear. Rather than inspiring someone to defy the risk of death, it acts as a palliative in the confrontation with death, and it allows both Professor Brand and Dr. Mann to avoid facing their own acts. Dr. Mann begins to speak the lines from the poem

after he turns away from the dying Cooper and after he tells Cooper that he thought he would be able to watch him die but cannot. Though Dr. Mann claims that the poem will comfort Cooper, it is clear that he turns to it in order to comfort himself. By placing the poem in the mouth of Dr. Mann just as he tries to kill Cooper, Nolan shifts its significance for the film. The poem, which seems to act as something like the film's anthem, does so only in a negative sense. It becomes an index for the individual corruption that resides within universalist pretensions.

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The HAL 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is the closest analogue to Dr. Mann. Both know the secret truth of the space mission, and both become murderous.



Because the robot refuses to betray the mission, Dr. Mann destroys it and sets it to explode when tampered with, which causes the death of Dr. Romilly.



Dr. Mann insists on his own purity even at the moment when he dies, despite the fact that he constantly places his own interests above those of all humanity.

Treachery in *Interstellar* always appears in the guise of purity. Professor Brand and Dr. Mann present themselves as acting for humanity rather than their own self-interest. And yet, they end up doing more damage to humanity's chances of survival than anyone else in the film. Professor Brand's lie concerning Plan A is a necessary lie, though his failure to allow himself to be deceived by it renders him culpable. Dr. Mann has no such excuse, and his ethical failure becomes evident not just in his attempt to eliminate Cooper but in his resemblance to the murderous computer in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

Though there are many allusions to *2001: A Space Odyssey* throughout *Interstellar*, the most significant occurs with Dr. Mann and the robot accompanying him on the mission. When the astronauts arrive at Dr. Mann's camp, they find him in cryogenic sleep and his robot KIPP in pieces. When he awakens, Dr. Mann explains that he had to decommission the robot because it began to malfunction by misidentifying organic life as ammonia. We soon learn that the robot correctly identified the absence of organic life on the planet, and its insistence on not sending back a false message resulted in Dr. Mann decommissioning it and setting it to self-destruct if anyone reactivated it (which directly causes the death of Romilly).

In contrast to Dr. Mann's claim, it is Dr. Mann rather than the robot that malfunctioned during the exploration, and his decommission of the robot mirrors the attempt by the HAL 9000 to rid itself of the humans accompanying it on the trip to Jupiter in *2001*. In Nolan's film, the machine functions properly while the human does not. This contrast with Kubrick's film reveals that in the world of *Interstellar* the chief danger is not external but internal. This danger is not impurity but an excess of purity—the subject that believes itself to be acting purely for the universal.[10] [open endnotes in new window]

The critique that *Interstellar* offers of the purportedly pure subject echoes Hegel's critique of the Kantian system. Kant bases his theory of knowledge and morality on the prospect of the subject's purity, even if this purity remains a regulative ideal rather than an achieved reality. This ideal of purity unites Kantian epistemology and Kantian morality, which otherwise appear as separate domains within his philosophy (and are relegated to separate books). The knowing subject, like the moral subject, operates with the ideal of freeing itself from the distortions produced by the subject's pathological considerations. Desire cannot figure in epistemological or moral calculations.

In Kantian morality, the moral law is pure because it is formal and untainted by any particular content. Even though the subject never attains this purity itself, the law's purity acts as a goal that guides the subject's activity. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant writes,

> "the sole principle of morality consists in independence from all matter of the law (namely, from a desired object) and at the same time in the determination of choice through the mere form of giving universal law that a maxim must be capable of."[11]

Kant views formalism as a way of sustaining the law's pure universality and overcoming the stain of particularity that threatens to impugn law. The problem with this formulation is that morality always requires an individual to act as the

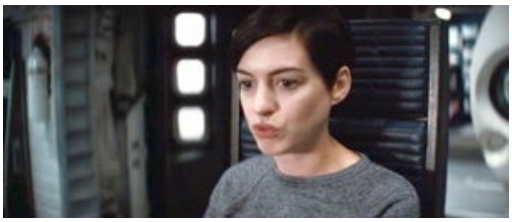
vehicle for the law's universality. Kant himself recognizes this, which is why he conceives morality as an infinite task rather than as a goal that the finite subject can actually accomplish.[12]

But what Kant doesn't recognize is the corrupting effect that his concept of morality has on the individual subject. The individual sees itself as the bearer of universality, and it sees corruption or particularity in the natural world that it confronts—both internally and externally. The moral task involves correcting the corruption. The subject posits a necessary disjunction between morality and the world, but it doesn't see that its failure to recognize its own necessary impurity is the source of this disjunction.



Dr. Mann's insistence on his own moral purity leads to his death in an explosion and puts all of humanity's survival at risk.

Hegel criticizes Kantian morality for helping to produce the very situation that it strives to remedy. In short, Kantian morality is hysterical. Its striving is infinite because it is not genuine striving but a counterfeit designed to reproduce itself rather than change the situation. As Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Because the universal *best* ought to be carried out, nothing *good* is done."[13] Whenever the subject conceives morality in terms of abstract purity (or, as in the case of Professor Brand and Dr. Mann, the entire species), it inevitably falls into this contradiction. Morality requires desire in order to emerge, and the subject that fails to account for this necessary impurity always falls victim to it. This is the fate of the Kantian moral subject and of the figures of moral purity in *Interstellar*.[14]



Cooper refuses Dr. Brand's argument that they should go to her boyfriend's planet because he sees the distortion in her desire as disqualifying. But the film shows that truth emerges through such distortions.

Even Cooper, the film's ostensible hero, succumbs to the abstract universality that derails both Professor Brand and Dr. Mann. After visiting the first planet and finding it completely uninhabitable due to the ubiquity of water, the three surviving astronauts of the *Endurance* must decide which of the two other possible planets they should visit. They have enough fuel to visit only one, and the first investigators on both planets sent back positive signals about them. Dr. Brand argues for the planet explored by Wolf Edmunds, while Cooper contends that the planet of Dr. Mann, which is closer, represents the more attractive option. Cooper persuades Romilly (David Gyasi), the deciding vote, when he points out that Dr. Brand's desire influenced her choice.

Though she expresses great admiration for Dr. Mann, Dr. Brand loves Wolf Edmunds. When Cooper confronts her with this factor weighing on her decision, she avows it and contends that love should play a part in the decisions that they make. Dr. Brand tells Cooper and Romilly, "The tiniest possibility of seeing Wolf again excites me. That doesn't mean I'm wrong." Cooper responds, "Honestly, Amelia, it might." For Cooper, love serves social utility but has only a deleterious effect on decisions like the one that the astronauts must make. By revealing how love has swayed Dr. Brand's argument, Cooper turns Romilly against her and ensures that they will go to Dr. Mann's planet, a decision that ends up being disastrous.



Cooper displays his own impurity when discussing his decision to accept NASA's request that he lead the mission through the wormhole.

Ironically, Cooper's conversation with Dr. Brand mirrors his own earlier conversation with his father-in-law Donald (John Lithgow), but Cooper now takes on the part that Donald played with him. As he sits on the porch of his farm with Donald discussing the decision to go on the mission, Cooper points out that his eagerness for the mission doesn't make it wrong, and Donald replies (anticipating exactly Cooper's response to Dr. Brand), "It might." This repetition reveals Cooper's own impurity despite his rejection of Dr. Brand's reasoning about the



Murph's discovery of the solution to the problem of gravity derives from her desire, not from her knowledge. Though the film doesn't downplay knowledge, it shows that desire is the revolutionary engine for thought.

basis of its impurity. The lack of objectivity—the influence of desire or love—is the basis for any insight that we might have rather than a barrier to it.

Nolan also displays the generative power of impurity when Murph solves the problem of gravity with Cooper's aid. Cooper can communicate with Murph across a vast distance and across time through his love for her, according to the conceit that the film develops. When he is on the edge of the black hole, he locates his daughter's bedroom across space and time because of this love. And when Murph makes the actual discovery of the solution to the problem of gravity, the sequence occurs with Hans Zimmer's score drowning out Murph's words and making them almost inaudible. Nolan chooses to emphasize Murph's psychic investment in her work through the overpowering music. Just as the music is more important than the words, so is Murph's desire the leading factor in her discovery.[15]

In contrast, Cooper's rejection of Dr. Brand's reasoning due to its impurity reflects his own kinship with Professor Brand and Dr. Mann, the two partisans of pure universality in the film. The problem with the pure subject—as with Kantian morality—is that this subject achieves purity only through an impure investment in purity. The commitment to eliminating desire is itself a product of desire, or, in other words, there is no way to get around desire without desiring to do so. This is why Alenka Zupancic claims that from a Kantian perspective there is no way to distinguish the moral act from diabolical evil. Both acts originate in the desire to eliminate the pathological and have exactly the same structure. According to Zupancic,

> "Following Kant—but at the same time going against Kant—we thus propose to assert explicitly that *diabolical evil, the highest evil, is indistinguishable from the highest good, and that they are nothing other than the definitions of an accomplished (ethical) act*. In other words, at the level of the structure of the ethical act, the difference between good and evil does not exist. At this level, evil is formally indistinguishable from good."[16]

Zupancic contends that this realization doesn't deal a death blow to Kantian morality but rather forces us to consider the ambiguity of the moral act: it is, in some sense, beyond good and evil. But the implication of her argument actually takes us to the terrain of Hegel's critique of Kant. The moral act is formally identical with diabolical evil—that is, evil for evil's sake—because it originates in the subject's desire without regard for considerations of interest that might dilute this desire. It is, one might say, a pure impurity, a desire unadulterated with pathological considerations.

The condemnation of moral purity in *Interstellar* is unrelenting, and it follows directly Hegel's critique of Kant. Neither Professor Brand nor Dr. Mann are Kantian moral subjects any more than Adolf Eichmann (who claimed to be so) was.[17] Most obviously, Kant would never countenance their lying. But Professor Brand and Dr. Mann show, unlike Eichmann, the ultimate failure of the idea of moral purity even as a goal after which we strive. The pure subject is simply a subject unaware of its impurity and thus vulnerable to treachery as a result of this unawareness. **(31)**



Even Dr. Mann's name suggests his impartiality and purity. But the film shows how impurity is

Hegel insists that the subject is constituted through a gap in its knowledge and in its moral being. This gap indicates the necessary impurity of the subject, but it also points the subject toward what might fill this gap. The subject seeks the beyond insofar as it promises to provide what the subject is missing. We call this beyond various names—God, the Other, they—but in each case, it marks the

necessary for the ethical act and how purity leads to evil.

inexplicable for us, a hole in our knowledge. The beyond holds the solution for humanity in *Interstellar*, but this solution depends on reconceiving the beyond, as Hegel puts it in the *Phenomenology*, "not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*."[18] Rethinking the beyond renders the beyond intimate to the subject, and this act that radically transforms the status of this beyond.

The inexistent they

The beyond in *Interstellar* takes the form of the wormhole and the source of its appearance. Most often, when we encounter a gap within our understanding, we translate this gap into a positive entity, which is what the characters do in the film. Either we substantialize the gap and give it a metaphysical significance—seeing it as God or as some form of alien intelligence—or we anticipate a future empirical substance that will fill the gap and complete our understanding. According to the former position, we will never understand what exists in this gap because it has a transcendent status relative to us. According to the latter position, if we don't understand something today, we will understand it tomorrow when our capacity for knowledge has improved. The former position represents the religious response to the gap in knowledge, and the latter represents the scientific. Hegel refuses both of these options. His philosophical project compels us to recognize what we experience as a beyond as an unbreachable gap and yet, at the same time, as immanent to the subject itself.



The scientists at NASA interpret the "we" as a "they," which is a necessary error that subsequent events enable Cooper to correct.

The gap in our knowledge first appears to us as a strange beyond that defies our comprehension. It is an otherness that seems to exist on another plane, or, in the terms of *Interstellar*, "they." When we mistake the immanence of the gap in our knowledge for a substantial "they," we commit ourselves to the exploration of the mysterious otherness, and it is this exploration that dissolves the otherness and reveals its ontological status as insubstantial. If one recognizes the otherness right away as an effect of the subject itself, then one misses the truth of the constitutive gap within knowledge that creates desire and thereby makes knowledge possible. The initial error of seeing "they" instead of a future "we" is a necessary error, without which no understanding is possible.

Many spectators, even on a first viewing of *Interstellar*, are able to predict that the "they" that creates the wormhole for humanity is humanity itself in the future. The savvy spectator might also predict that the ghost communicating with Murph in her bedroom at the beginning of the film is not an alien being but her father in another time and place. In all of Nolan's films, it is possible to figure out the deception prior to its unveiling at the conclusion. One can guess, for instance, that that Borden (Christian Bale) can perform his magic trick "The Transported Man" in *The Prestige* (2006) because he has an identical twin brother. Nolan's filmic deceptions do not dupe the cunning spectator.



Though we might guess the truth about the secret of the bookshelf early on while watching the film, allowing oneself to be duped is the key to arriving at truth in a Nolan film.

And yet they should. If one immediately sees through the deception and understands that the "they" that opened the wormhole is simply future humanity, then one doesn't gain direct access to the truth but completely misses it. In Nolan's films, as in Hegel's philosophy, it is necessary to pass through the deception—to allow oneself to be deceived—in order to discover the truth lurking within (rather than behind) the deception.[19] To discern the truth right away would be akin to skipping directly to "Absolute Knowing" while reading Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The reader who does this avoids the deceptions of sense certainty, perception, and the other conceptions of experience, but in the process she or he misses the truth of absolute knowing. This truth is indissociable from and is constituted by the failures to arrive at it. To proceed to the truth directly is to miss it entirely.



The power of the black hole Gargantua enables Cooper to communicate across time and space with Murph, thereby creating in the past his own desire to find the secret NASA base and go on the mission.



When he is in the Tesseract, Cooper realizes that future humanity is at the origin of the rescue mission.



Cooper uses Morse Code on the second hand of a watch to communicate with Murph and to explain the solution to the problem of gravity. It is his alienation from place that enables him to save humanity.

Cooper comes to the realization that the mysterious "they" is humanity itself while he is suspended on the brink of the black hole Gargantua in the Tesseract that future humans constructed for him. As the *Endurance* slingshots around Gargantua in order to investigate the final possible planet in the system, the robot TARS ejects in order to lighten the ship's load and to transmit data from the black hole. Just after TARS leaves the ship, Cooper follows the robot in a sacrificial gesture designed to increase Dr. Brand's chances of making it to Edmunds's planet and finding a new home for humanity. But when TARS and Cooper enter the black hole, they discover the Tesseract where they can see and communicate with their own past. The proximity to the black hole creates the possibility of overcoming the barrier of time and space through the power of gravity, which the advanced version of humanity is able to harness.

As Cooper looks into his own past, TARS reproves him for losing sight of the mission, which involves the future of humanity rather than its past. He says, "They didn't bring us here to change the past." But Cooper recognizes the paradox that TARS misses. He replies, "They didn't bring us here at all. We brought ourselves." At this point, Cooper sees that what appears as an alien beyond that transcends our knowledge is our own self-transcendence. The possibility for emancipation that the wormhole offers to humanity is a possibility that emerges out of humanity's own future. By depicting this relationship between the future and the present, Nolan offers a rethinking of emancipation: we don't free ourselves by creating a different future but by creating a different past—exactly what TARS says they are not meant to do.

In the Tesseract, Cooper can see into Murph's bedroom and can communicate with her by pushing from behind her bookshelf and dislodging various books. He begins by using Morse code to give her the message that he should stay and not go on the mission. He follows this up by proving the coordinates to NASA in binary code. We have seen both events from the other side earlier in the film, but then he sends a message that we haven't seen. Finally, with the help of TARS, he encodes (again in Morse) the solution to the problem of gravity in the movement of the second hand of the watch that he gave to Murph before he left. Through these gestures, Cooper is able to change the past and create the possibility for his own act of changing the past. He acts as the future humans do when they open the wormhole: his act violates the logic of chronological time and creates the conditions of its own possibility.

One can imagine spectators objecting to Nolan's conception of temporal causality in *Interstellar*. Future humans open the wormhole to rescue humanity from the blighted Earth, but their existence depends on the very rescue that they make possible. This is the paradox at the core of the narrative structure of *Interstellar*, and it defies our usual thinking about causality. But Nolan's film asks the spectator to rethink causality in Hegelian terms. For Hegel, the past doesn't shape the present—he is not a historicist philosopher—but the present shapes the past. That is to say, the present creates its own conditions of possibility in the past and thus violates the seemingly straightforward structure of temporality.[20]

When an event occurs, it retroactively changes the past so that it becomes possible. The event seems as if it were inevitable, as if the causes for it were present all along. But these causes become evident only after the event. Prior to the event's taking place, it was impossible, and its occurrence changes the structure of the past in order to make it possible. As Alain Badiou puts it,

> "An event is the creation of new possibilities. It is located not merely at the level of objective possibilities but at the level of the possibility or



When Murph receives a message from Cooper, *Interstellar* shows how an event can rewrite the past.

> possibilities. Another way of putting this: with respect to a situation or a world, an event paves the way for the possibility of what … is strictly impossible."[21]

Interstellar asks us to believe, following what Badiou says here, in the possibility of the impossible—that is, in the possibility of an act worthy of Baron von Münchausen, who could purportedly lift himself out of his own chair without touching the ground. This capacity exists because the subject posits its own presuppositions and can change its own past when it accedes to the power of the fiction. But cynical distrust of the fiction has the effect of incapacitating it, which is why *Interstellar* includes an interlude attacking the prevalence of cynicism today.

Suspicious minds

In the midst of the exposition of the future devastated Earth, *Interstellar* pauses in order to introduce a brief commentary on a conspiracy theory about the moon landing. In the structure of the film, cynicism about the reality of the moon landing stands in for all conspiracy theories, which originate from a refusal to allow oneself to be duped by a controlling fiction. Conspiracy theories have garnered such popularity today because they serve as a vehicle for cynical distance from the fictions that govern collective existence. As collective fictions have lost their efficaciousness, cynical distance has become a source of respite for the subject, and conspiracy theories offer this distance in abundance. They promise freedom from lies and direct access to truth, but direct access is never as direct as all that. If Nolan's films all propound the creative power and the ethical importance of the fiction, then the appearance of the critique of conspiracy theory in *Interstellar* should not take the spectator by surprise. The conspiracy theorist wrongly sees truth as separable from the fiction and attempts to postulate their absolute distinctiveness through the rejection of the fiction for the sake of the hidden truth.



Conspiracy theories—concerning, for instance, Kennedy's assassination—predominate today, and they help to create cynical subjects.

Conspiracy theory is prevalent across the contemporary political spectrum. The Right sees sinister forces of the United Nations attempting to usurp national sovereignty, while the Left imagines pharmaceutical companies keeping magical remedies (like colloidal silver) off the market in order to increase their own profit margin. Other conspiracy theories, such as the belief that the World Trade Center collapse was an inside job or that shooters from the grassy knoll killed John Kennedy, know no political boundaries. In fact, in the contemporary political climate it is difficult to avoid investing oneself in some form of conspiracy theory. The problem is that even if these conspiracy theories are factually accurate—say, pharmaceutical companies have really discovered the medical efficacy of colloidal silver and decided to suppress their findings—the conspiracy theory nonetheless has a pathological effect on the subject invested in it. In fact, one is tempted to say that if the conspiracy theory is correct, so much for the worse for the conspiracy theory because it strongly encourages the proponent of this theory in her or his own cynical position.

The function of conspiracy is to provide subjects with an assurance that some agency is actually directing events with full knowledge and thus that events are not simply the result of our own activity. Conspiracy solidifies our belief in a substantial beyond that remains unknowable and at the same time unimpeachable. Any fact that pokes a hole in the conspiracy becomes not evidence against the cover-up but rather further evidence of its vastness.[22]

Conspiracy theories perform an essential ideological function by substantializing

the gap within knowledge and thereby obscuring the absence of any authority consciously pulling the strings of society. The conspiracy theorist cannot recognize, to put it in Hegel's terms, that substance is subject, that the authorities are as divided and lacking as the subject itself. Conspiracy theories supplement ideology, but they are seldom institutionalized within the structure of ideology. Typically, the conspiracy theorist gains an extra libidinal benefit from believing in the conspiracy because such belief defies the official version of events. One experiences the conspiracy theory as a radical act of questioning what one is told to believe. But it is possible to imagine the conspiracy theory integrated into the institutional history, which is what occurs in *Interstellar*.



Murph's teacher insists to Cooper that the Apollo moon landings were faked in an effort to bankrupt the Soviet Union. This shows the utter dominance of conspiracy theories in the filmic universe.

Today, cynicism about the moon landing is a minority position, but in the world of *Interstellar*, it has become the official version of the events. Murph runs into trouble at school for her refusal to accept that the landing didn't occur, and at a parent/teacher conference, Cooper confronts her teacher Ms. Hanley (Collette Wolfe) about the incident, which ended with Murph in a fight with fellow students. According to Hanley, the Apollo 11 moon landing was an effective piece of U.S. propaganda designed to lure the Soviet Union into increasing expenses in the space race. Hanley admits the efficaciousness of this strategy, but she feels that it's important to teach students the cynical (and to her mind, true) history.

The conspiracy theory about the moon landing has a privileged importance in the world of *Interstellar* because this theory evinces a skepticism about the possibility of transcending place in a way that theories about the assassination of John Kennedy do not.[23] If even the voyage to the moon were faked, this demonstrates that we are irrevocably stuck on Earth, and the authorities promulgate this theory in order to convince the populace of their stuckness. Subjects stuck in place cannot emancipate themselves. Though movement itself is not revolution, it is nonetheless the condition of possibility for revolution.[24] But radical movement is precisely what the conspiracy theory about the moon landing denies. It comprehends humans as Earth-bound beings.

Like any disciple of Hegel, Nolan finds conspiracy theory especially noxious. The conspiracy theorist refuses to invest herself or himself in the symbolic fiction that structures the social order. In her or his resistance to being duped, this subject misses out on the fiction, which is the only path to truth. The conspiracy theorist wants truth too quickly, without the detour of falsity, and as a result, she or he never escapes the self-deception of believing herself or himself to be in possession of direct access to the truth. Nolan includes the interlude about the moon landing to reveal the error of the position that refuses to submit to error.

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Sentimental distance



Love is the means that Cooper uses to locate Murph in the Tesseract, despite the fact that earlier he mocks Dr. Brand's recourse to love as a guide.

Perhaps the most incisive critique of *Interstellar* contends that the film itself submits to error much too enthusiastically. This critique concerns its recourse to maudlin dialogue expressing bald sentimentality. This seems to be not only a gesture typical of Hollywood filmmaking, but also opposed to the scientific outlook that makes the exploration that the film depicts possible. The sentimentality comes to a head after the disaster of the water planet that leaves the surviving astronauts with the decision of which of the two remaining planets they should visit—Wolf Edmunds's planet or Dr. Mann's. Dr. Brand argues for visiting Wolf Edmunds's planet instead of Dr. Mann's on the basis of the insight that her love for Edmunds gives her. This sentimentality also bombards the spectator through the relationship between the father Cooper and his daughter Murph. While the otherwise scientific Dr. Brand goes so far as to suggest that love provides a connection across the barriers of space and time, Cooper's communication to Murph actually does transcend spatial and temporal barriers.

The panegyric to love that *Interstellar* employs appears to mark a departure from its speculative insights and to return it to the terrain of the typical film in which love solves otherwise intractable contradictions. The spectator could be excused for thinking that she or he had temporarily stumbled into *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990) or *Sleepless in Seattle* (Nora Ephron, 1990) while listening to Dr. Brand proclaim the power of love. According to the sentimental version of love, it provides a harmonious connection that overcomes our individual isolation. In a universe that contains love, existential solitude is not our destiny. But love in *Interstellar* bears little resemble to this sentimental version. It does not simply accomplish the transcendence of distance and isolation but relies on them as well. Love requires absence and rupture in order to emerge as a connection, and this absence remains integral to the connection that it forges.



Cooper's connection with Murph requires that he first abandon her. This separates the depiction of love from typical filmic depictions.

Each iteration of love in *Interstellar* centers on absence or rupture. In order to express his love for Murph by transcending time and space, Cooper must first leave her. Murph experiences his departure as a complete betrayal, and she despises Cooper for what he does (especially after she learns about Professor Brand's lie and assumes Cooper's complicity in it). This initial betrayal plays a central role in making the connection between Cooper and Murph evident. Cooper can communicate with Murph in the Tesseract only if he has previously abandoned her on Earth. But even the miraculous communication in the Tesseract that spans time and space reveals the necessity of an obstacle for love to articulate itself.

The Tesseract does not allow Cooper to talk to Murph or communicate with her directly in any fashion. It facilitates only indirect communication.[25] Cooper must knock books off Murph's bookshelf and manipulate the second hand of her watch in order to send her messages. His love for Murph requires the barrier of the bedroom wall and the mediation of Morse code to express itself. If he could speak to her directly, it would not appear as an act of love, and Nolan's film usually highlights the barrier in its depiction of love. The barrier that creates absence is not opposed to love but a constitutive part of it.

The scenes of reunion that conclude the film further this idea. When Cooper



Cooper sees Murph again, but she is on her deathbed. Absence always mediates the love connection in the film.



The film ends with Dr. Brand finally reunited with her lover, but he has already died.



Love is always impure in *Interstellar*, but this impurity doesn't destroy love. It enables it, as in the case of Cooper and Murph.

finally sees Murph again, she is a dying old woman, and when Dr. Brand arrives at Wolf Edmunds's planet, he is already dead. There are no harmonious reunions in *Interstellar*, and absence remains attached to love through the end of the film. This separates it definitively from *Pretty Woman* and *Sleepless in Seattle*. As Nolan's film shows, love for the dying and the dead is not simply an extension of love for the living but the paradigmatic form of love. After Dr. Brand's plea for her fellow astronauts to follow her insights based on love, Cooper objects, "Love has meaning, yes—social utility, child rearing." The film cuts back to Dr. Brand, whose counterargument is revelatory. She says, "We love people who are dead. Where's the social utility in that?" This statement encapsulates the film's conception of love: rather than serving social utility, love connects us to what is absent, and this absence is the stimulus for it. When one loves, one loves what is not there. Even when Cooper finally connects with Murphy in the Tesseract through his love for her, this love requires a barrier in order to manifest itself. The Tesseract, which operates through love, shows that love requires distance.[26] [open endnotes in new window] Love is the fiction that enables us to overcome absence while remaining within it. This is why Hegel begins his intellectual career by thinking that love might provide the basis for an entire philosophy.

In his early thought, Hegel gives love an ontological place. It has the power to elide spatial and temporal difference, to forge identity within difference. Though later Hegel will come to see contradiction as absolute, love stands at this point in his trajectory as a way of overcoming contradiction. But even here, love requires the difference that it overcomes. In a fragment from his *Early Theological Writings*, Hegel explains,

> "love completely destroys objectivity and thereby annuls and transcends reflection, deprives man's opposite of all foreign character, and discovers life itself without any further defect. In love the separate does still remain, but as something united and no longer as something separate."[27]

Hegel's final sentence expresses an ambiguity that nicely captures the idea of love: the separate both remains separate and isn't separate at the same time. But this statement about love nonetheless represents an unsustainable position for Hegel philosophically, which is why his mature thought departs from it.

The problem occurs with the claim that love "discovers life without any further defect." As *Interstellar* shows (and Hegel's later philosophy emends), love doesn't erase the defect but embraces it. Love is itself an impurity that depends on our defects—our inability to be present—in order to emerge. If Dr. Brand and Wolf Edmunds had a connection without a defect, Dr. Brand would never have to articulate it to Romilly and Cooper. The heroism of love coincides with an embrace of one's impurity. What gives love its ethical status is that it highlights rather than obscures our defects.

The absent hero

Christopher Nolan's films notoriously obscure their ethical center. One of the primary ways that they mislead spectators is by presenting a hero in whom the spectator can invest only to reveal that the film's ethical center lies elsewhere, that the investment has been misplaced. This center is usually not the focus of the filmic narrative nor the ostensible hero. Most often, the ethical center appears as an alternative to the ostensible hero and his mode of existence. The examples of



The hero of Nolan film is often not who we expect it to be but a figure who is largely absent, like Leonard Shelby's wife in *Memento*.

this figure extend from Leonard Shelby's wife (Jorja Fox) in *Memento* (2000) to the Joker (Heath Ledger) in *The Dark Knight* (2008) to Mal (Marion Cotillard) in *Inception* (2010). The ostensible hero rejects the path that these figures offer, but this rejection reveals that the main focus of the narrative should not in fact be the source of our investment.

The ostensible hero in *Interstellar* is not a serial killer like Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) in *Memento* or a sophisticated deceiver like Cobb in *Inception*. He is a much more sympathetic figure. Cooper, the ostensible hero of *Interstellar*, displays genuine heroism in the film. He volunteers to fly through a wormhole into another galaxy with slim odds of surviving in order to find a new home for humanity. And he ultimately communicates the solution to the problem of gravity to his daughter on Earth, which enables her to help all its inhabitants.

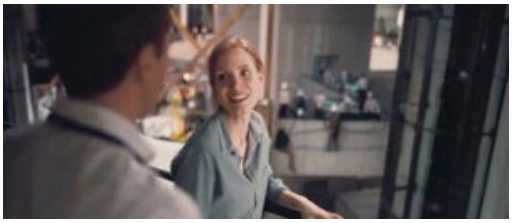
Cooper himself feeds the illusion that he is the hero. Before he leaves on the voyage, he tells Murph, "I can't be your ghost now. I need to exist. They chose me." Events in the film give weight to Cooper's statement here. They perpetuate the idea that Cooper is the chosen one, the hero who can rescue humanity. When he performs the visually remarkable docking with the spinning *Endurance* as it plunges to the atmosphere of Dr. Mann's planet, it seems that his estimation of himself is correct, but the film subsequently gives the lie to this idea.

Cooper has a momentary recognition in the Tesseract that Murph is the real hero. He says to himself, "They didn't choose me. They chose her." But when he awakens the space station orbiting around Saturn, he forgets this insight and returns to thinking of himself as the hero. He learns that he is aboard a structure entitled "Cooper Station," and when he expresses appreciation for it being named after him, his doctor chuckles to himself and informs him that it is named after his daughter, Murphy Cooper. Murph, not Cooper, is the real hero of *Interstellar* because she exhibits fidelity to the fiction and thus to making the impossible possible. For Nolan, this is the ethical act.



The first line of the film is a lie told by Murph, in which she characterizes Cooper as a farmer, though in fact he hated farming. This association with the lie, rather than impugning Murph, hints at her ethical status.

Murph's commitment to the fiction appears in the film's first spoken line. We hear her say, "My dad was a farmer." While it is true that Cooper was a farmer, he never sees himself in this way and actually detested farming. Her fiction about his love for farming leads a curator to construct a replica of the family farm on Cooper Station for him, and when Cooper sees his dying daughter again, he asks rhetorically, "You told them that I loved farming?" This seemingly unimportant joke on Murph's part actually gives us crucial insight into her character and to the status that she accords to fiction.[29] It is her commitment to the fiction that leads to the discovery that rescues humanity.



Murph shouts "Eureka" after her discovery and

Nolan's depiction of Murph's discovery makes clear the nature of her heroism. It resides in her ability to submerge herself entirely in the problem without any skepticism about the possibility of finding a solution. This absence of skepticism manifests itself through the formal structure surrounding her discovery. When we see Murph on Earth, she remains devoted to the discovery of a solution and refuses to accept the barrier of impossibility that Professor Brand accepts. When Murph finds the solution to the equation that will enable humans to use gravity to leave Earth, Nolan shows her in a montage sequence working feverishly. As she announces the solution to the other scientists at the NASA base, she tosses her papers in the air and proclaims, "Eureka," echoing Einstein's famous statement of discovery. This is the point at which Nolan raises the level of the music to obscure

throws her papers into the air. Nolan shows this as her triumph rather than as Cooper's.

her words and to show that her heroism stems from her exaggerated commitment to the problem.

Nolan further indicates Murph's heroism by juxtaposing her efforts to save her brother's family and to discover the solution to the problem of gravity against Dr. Mann's attempt to maroon Cooper and Dr. Brand on his desolate planet. As Cooper learns about Dr. Mann's betrayal of the mission, the film cuts back to Murph driving away from the family farm after failing to convince her brother Tom (Casey Affleck) to leave for the sake of his sick child. Dr. Mann provides false comfort to Cooper by assuring him, "You've not alone," and repeating the Dylan Thomas poem Mann says, "Do not go gentle into that good night" as he walks away and leaves Cooper to suffocate. Through Dr. Mann says, "I'm here for you," while Cooper dies, Mann can't tolerate the suffering and turns off the speaker in his helmet. At this point, the film cuts to Murph turning her jeep into the family cornfield, where she will set fire to the corn in order to force Tom to leave.



Murph heroically burns her brother's cornfield in order to save him and his family, even though this earns her his enmity. The film juxtaposes this heroic act through crosscutting with the cowardice of Dr. Mann.

The sequence depicts the contrast between the film's most ignominious character and the film's hero. Dr. Mann presents himself as someone who understands the difficult truths that others cannot face about the importance of the species and the unimportance of the individual, but he constantly acts in ways that threaten the survival of the species because he refuses to sacrifice himself. Murph's juxtaposed act of setting fire to the farm saves her brother's family, though it earns her his hatred. She puts her own well-being at stake because she sees that this is the only possible way to counteract a seemingly intractable force (her brother's stubbornness). But most of the heroism that Murph displays is not physical heroism, as it is in this case. It is literary.

Heroism in *Interstellar* is not flying oneself into space but learning how to read. The film begins with a travelling shot depicting dust falling on Murph's bookcase, and this bookcase provides the key to escaping the deadly dust. Murph first learns to read the messages that Cooper sends her from the future through the falling books, and then she solves the problem of gravity by interpreting the Morse code that he uses on her watch. These interpretations provide the basis for the rescue of humanity. The act of interpretation is the heroic act because it changes the terrain of the situation. The proper interpretation transforms gravity from being what chains us to place to being a lever for emancipation from place.

The editing of the film contrasts Murph and Dr. Mann, but the ability to read well separates Murph from the film's other misguided character—Professor Brand. Though Professor Brand organizes the entire operation to rescue humanity and constructs the fiction that makes the project possible, the distance that he takes up toward his own fiction renders him, in the words of his daughter, "monstrous." We know Professor Brand as a reader through the poem that he repeats, the lines from "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." Though Dr. Mann's invocation of this same poem while trying to kill Cooper undermines it in the film, the poem is sufficiently suspect on its own, and Professor Brand's affection for it reveals his limitations as a reader.

The problem with Thomas's poem is that it articulates a straightforward imperative that doesn't place any interpretive burden on the reader or listener. Everyone knows that the poem is trying to say, and its simple meter doesn't add any challenge for the interpreter. Of course, we shouldn't grade poems higher for unnecessary obscurity—T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" isn't a great poem just because it takes intensive study to make sense of it—but the significance of a poem derives from the distortion that it creates in language. A poem interrupts our everyday relation to language even if it does so in everyday language, and this forces us to rethink the situation in which we find ourselves. Interpreting a poem is itself an act of changing one's life, as Rilke once put it in "The Archaic Torso of



Murph's heroism is that of interpretation. She can act ethically because she reads rather than simply acting.

Apollo." A poem that doesn't require interpretation doesn't transform the interpreter's relation to language or way of thinking about her or his situation. Desire, like love, demands indirection.

Even as a child, Murph (as far as we can see) does not have a book containing this poem on her bookshelf. Instead, she takes on interpretive projects that involve her in a significant distortion and thus require a transformative act of interpretation. The fact that the film begins with a bookcase is not insignificant: one can discover emancipation only through learning how to read properly, and this requires reading apparently indecipherable texts. Murph demonstrates an interpretive ability that outstrips that of all the other characters in the film, and it is this ability that constitutes the basis of her heroism. The fiction emancipates us from place, but one must interpret the fiction in order to actualize this emancipation.

Interstellar is a film about emancipation and the difficulties that confront it. The film takes the side of Hegel's insistence on the emancipatory rupture from place against Heidegger's attempted fidelity to it. Gravity is the chief obstacle in the film because it holds humanity in place. But if gravity is an obstacle, it also embodies possibility: gravity makes it possible for humanity to escape the inhospitable Earth and find a new planet. Because gravity has the power to hold humans in place on Earth, it also has the capacity to emancipate them from place. Such dialectical reversals are only possible through the magic of interpretation. Once Murph interprets gravity in the proper way, its emancipatory valence undergoes a complete transformation.

Throughout its running time, *Interstellar*, like Hegel's philosophy, asks us to undertake a radical reconsideration of our obstacles. Instead of conceiving of obstacle as a barrier to be overcome or eliminated, we must see the obstacle as the



Interstellar shows that we must reconsider the problem itself as its own solution, and this is what Murph does.

site for our own emancipation. This is why the film begins with books and foregrounds fiction. The creation and interpretation of fictions change the nature of the problems that we confront. When one reconciles oneself with contradiction through the interpretive act—what I take to be the task of Hegel's philosophy—one discovers that the problem is its own solution.[30] But in order to see that the problem is its own solution, one requires a fiction in order to transform the structure of the problem and render the solution visible. *Interstellar* demands that we rethink emancipation through the lens of what constrains us.

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Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1962), 413. [return to text]

2. Heidegger's concern for the problem of dwelling in modernity reaches its apogee in his essay "Building Dwelling Thinking." There, Heidegger points out that the problem of a lack of houses for everyone—that is, homelessness—is really a synecdoche for the failure to dwell properly. See Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, in *Poetry, Language, Thoughts*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 161.

3. What separates Hegel from Gilles Deleuze and other apostles of fluidity is that he views the rupture from place as the decisive event that must be preserved. The subject emerges out of this rupture and cannot exist without the negative reference to place that Deleuze disallows.

4. The fiction that the subject originates without any context and subsequently falls into space and time is what Heidegger attacks as the metaphysical fiction. His destruction of metaphysics is the destruction of this independent subject that has no basis in experience. Heidegger's inability to see the performative power of the metaphysical fiction leaves his thought stuck in the unfreedom of place.

5. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 23.

6. The conceit—solving the environmental crisis by finding a new environment—turns off many spectators from Nolan's film right away. It seems to model the perfect consumerist view of the planet: when one commodity ceases to provide satisfaction, toss it aside and seek out another. But after watching *Interstellar* in its entirety, it becomes clear that the film shares little with the consumerist mindset. The film stresses the necessary absence of the object, whereas the consumer demands its presence. I am indebted to Richard Boothby (Loyola University Maryland) for pointing out this possible objection to me.

7. Jean-Paul Sartre points out that no situation is inherently revolutionary but always requires a revolutionary subject to activate it. But this claim doesn't go far enough. One must see how the revolutionary desire of the subject actually creates the situation in which this desire can come to fruition. This is the lesson of *Interstellar*.

8. The fact that Plan A doesn't exist and yet animates the desire of so many people in the film enables us to call it "Plan (objet) a," after Jacques Lacan's objet a. Like the objet a, Plan A structures desire through its absence rather than its presence. I owe this point to Jonathan Mulrooney (Holy Cross).

9. Hegel describes the absolute as the reconciliation of what ought to be with what is, so that we reconsider our striving as itself already a realization. Hegel says, "But the harmony between the 'is' and the 'ought to be' is not torpid and rigidly

stationary. Good, the final end of the world, has being, only while it constantly produces itself." G. W. F. Hegel, *Logic*, trans William Wallace (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 291. In this way, Hegel shows how the embrace of striving as its own accomplishment institutes the distortion of desire into the understanding of subjectivity.

10. In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, HAL becomes murderous because he alone knows the contradictory truth and must conceal information from the crew. One might make the same claim about Dr. Mann in *Interstellar*. It seems that the robots do not know that Plan A is a fiction and that only Professor Brand and Dr. Mann know. For a compelling analysis of HAL in *2001* that develops this reading, see Michael Berubé, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (New York: Verso, 1994). [return to text]

11. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 166.

12. It is the subject's necessary failure to accomplish its moral duty that leads Kant to posit the existence of an afterlife in which the subject can fulfill its infinite striving as morally necessary, even though Kant himself didn't actually believe in personal immortality.

13. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 376.

14. In an age in which private space exploration has outstripped and clearly supplanted public endeavors, *Interstellar* represents a plea for funding NASA. It contends that space exploration works for everyone rather than for particular interests and thus must occur through the efforts of a public agency. At the same time, the film shows NASA now housed at NORAD, which is the current site of the command center for the American nuclear arsenal. The use of NORAD (along with that of former Marine robots like TARS and CASE) reveals the impurity of even the public agency. NASA is trying to save humanity, but doing so requires the utilization of particular instruments opposed to the universal.

15. Earlier in the film, Nolan has Zimmer's score drown out Murph's words after she learns that Plan A was a fake from Professor Brand. As she records a message to Cooper, we can barely make out portions of what she says. The excess of music here indicates that Murph's anger toward Cooper completely shapes what she says.

16. Alenka Zupancic, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (New York: Verso, 2000), 92. Kant rejects the possibility that diabolical evil or evil for evil's sake might exist because he implicitly understands that its structure mirrors that of morality.

17. In his defense at his trial in Jerusalem for his role in the Nazi genocide, Adolf Eichmann portrayed himself as obeying the Kantian categorical imperative when he followed orders and carried out the Final Solution. Obviously, this claim in no way transforms Eichmann into an argument against Kantian morality.

18. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 10.

19. In this way, Hegel anticipates Jacques Lacan's well-known dictum that "the non-duped err."

20. This is what Rebecca Comay makes clear in her account of Hegel where she notes that in his thought, "instead of determining the future, the past is freed to receive a new meaning from the future." Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 133.

21. Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2010), 242-243. Though Badiou is for the most part an anti-Hegelian thinker, his conception of the event as transformative of the past that leads to it follows directly the orientation of Hegel's philosophy, which conceives the past as the product of the distortion of the present.

22. The theory of the link between vaccines and autism offers a nice example of this attitude. Even after the Institute of Medicine published its definitive research debunking the link between vaccines and autism and even after the author of the original study discovering the link renounced his earlier claims, most opponents of vaccines were unconvinced. After I confronted him with these new revelations, a friend of mine simply commented, "It shows just how powerful the pharmaceutical companies are." Because conspiracy theory offers the psychic reward of a substantial agent occupying the gap within knowledge, no refutation will ever be adequate. One must instead persuade the conspiracy theorist to question the psychic reward itself.

23. Given the link between the conspiracy theory about the moon landing and the idea of rootedness, one might imagine that Martin Heidegger, in the last years of his life, was skeptical about the images being transmitted by Apollo 11 from the surface of the moon.

24. For the contemporary followers of Gilles Deleuze (such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri), movement itself is a revolutionary act. Capitalism exists only through the restraint of the movement that it unleashes, and the revolutionary struggle against capitalism consists in eliminating this restraint, what Deleuze would call "reterritorialization."

25. Soren Kierkegaard conceives of indirect communication as the only possible means for transmitting Christian love. Direct communication—what the receiver would immediately understand—would have the effect of lowering love to the level of an everyday commonplace phenomenon and thereby stripping it of its transcendence.

26. I owe this point to Danny Cho (Otterbein University). [return to text]

27. G. W. F. Hegel, "Love," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M, Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 305.

28. Though Leonard (Guy Pearce) clearly departs from his wife's emphasis on repetition (her insistence on rereading the same book) by looking for a clear solution to her death and Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) decides to leave the dream world where Mal wants him to stay, the relation between Batman (Christian Bale) and the Joker is more ambiguous. At the conclusion of *The Dark Knight*, Batman adopts the fiction of criminality, which places him in proximity to the Joker.

29. The existence of the farm as a tribute to Cooper on Cooper Station has the effect of undermining the plaque that is also there. The plaque displays the words to the Dylan Thomas poem that Professor Brand repeats, but we should take it no more seriously than we do the farm decided to Cooper and his love of farming.

30. Stanley Rosen makes the point that Hegel's emphasis on the whole is simultaneously an emphasis on contradiction. He writes, "It is a bit melodramatic and perhaps even misleading to say merely that for Hegel, the whole *is* contradiction. But this melodramatic assertion can be refined and developed into a sound description of the motor of Hegel's logic." Stanley Rosen, *The Idea of Hegel's "Science of Logic"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 59.



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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Feeling moved: racial embodiment, emotion, and Asian American spectatorship

by Jeanette Roan

Introduction: Bruce Lee vs. Mr. Yunioshi

Images from *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*



In a scene from *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (Rob Cohen, 1993), Bruce Lee (Jason Scott Lee) and Linda Emery (Lauren Holly) attend a screening of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards, 1961), a film that is infamous for Mickey Rooney's offensive caricature of the character Mr. Yunioshi. Here, as the sound of a buzzer awakens him, Mr. Yunioshi hits his head on a paper lantern as he sits up.



Emery and most of the audience respond with merriment to Mr. Yunioshi's clumsy antics, their enjoyment of the film evident in the expressions on their faces and the sounds and movements of their laughter.



Lee, in contrast, does not seem to find Mr. Yunioshi's actions amusing judging from this close-up of his face. Is he angry or simply resigned? He is clearly not laughing along with

A scene from the biopic *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* (Rob Cohen, 1993) begins with an establishing shot of a brightly illuminated theater marquee advertising a comedy film festival. We soon see Bruce Lee (Jason Scott Lee) and Linda Emery (Lauren Holly) sitting side by side in a crowded theater as we hear Emery exclaim, "I love this movie so much!" A few moments later, the screen of the theater shows Mr. Yunioshi (Mickey Rooney) from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards, 1961) abruptly awakened by the sound of a buzzer.[1] [open endnotes in new window] He sits up and immediately hits his head on a low-hanging paper lantern. The audience reacts with uproarious laughter. As Yunioshi drowsily stumbles through his apartment towards the door, colliding with various objects, the audience responds with hilarity at his every utterance of pain and outrage. Emery laughs as well, and then turns to see Lee's reaction. He is clearly not amused. From a close-up of his face, we sense a mix of frustration and anger.

The next shot sequence in *Dragon* cuts from a low-angle image of Yunioshi peering down over the stairwell, sputtering with indignation, to a close-up of Lee's face in the audience. The contrast between Lee and the infamous yellowface caricature could not be any clearer.[2] But what *Dragon* so intriguingly stages in this scene is not just the obvious distinction between the caricature and the future icon but also the displeasure elicited by the cinematic stereotype on the face of a man who would become known for shattering those very stereotypes.[3]

The set of Lee's jaw in his unsmiling face, the uncomfortable shifting in his seat, and the subtle stiffening of his spine demonstrate the film's failure to move him in a pleasurable manner. Indeed, his tensed immobility, as compared to the rhythmic contractions of laughter in the audience members around him, suggests a distinctly negative physical and emotional response to the film. As Meaghan Morris writes,

> "So clear is the scene's affirmation of the diverse collective nature of film experience that it could be said to deconstruct the very idea of '*the* spectator' (that wishful critical projection) and its attendant generalizing rhetoric about 'what really moves *us*.'"[4]

Different spectators apparently see and feel films differently. The reasons for and mechanisms of such divergent experiences of the same film are not, however, so obvious.

the rest of the audience.



A medium close-up of Mr. Yunioshi emphasizes his buck teeth and other make-up and costume details that supposedly make him look Asian. As he expresses his indignation at being disturbed, his poor and accented English further highlights his difference.



As Emery turns and sees Lee's expression, she realizes that he is not enjoying the film, and she seemingly begins to understand how offensive he finds the portrayal of Mr. Yunioshi in the film.



Once Emery understands how Lee sees the film, she shares his critique of the onscreen image. This medium shot of the two spectators sitting in stony silence as the audience around them enjoys the film demonstrates their shared resistance to the caricature.

The impetus for my article came from a simple question based on my own film viewing: Why did I, a U.S.-born Chinese American woman with family roots in Taiwan, enjoy watching the Hong Kong film *Infernal Affairs* (Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002) so much more than the Martin Scorsese-directed remake *The Departed* (2006)? Both films are well made and suspenseful, with compelling performances by established stars acting out very similar narratives. There are clearly many reasons a viewer might prefer one film over another. But what might explain why, despite my reliance on the English-language subtitles, and the many moments in *Infernal Affairs* that were somewhat opaque to me, I felt more "comfortable" in the ostensibly foreign milieu of the Hong Kong film than in the more familiar space, at least in terms of language and general cultural and cinematic conventions, of *The Departed*? How might I account for my responses to these two films, and what might this suggest about racial embodiment and cinematic spectatorship?

Although I do not propose that my own personal experiences of these two films are necessarily representative of the responses of any larger group of spectators, I do believe that they can serve as a provocation for the investigation that follows. Vivian Sobchack notes the usefulness of autobiographical or anecdotal experiences as a point of departure for analysis, insisting that they are not opposed to rigor and objectivity, but rather, that they offer

> "the phenomenological—and embodied—premises for a more processual, expansive, and resonant materialist logic through which we, as subjects, can understand (and perhaps guide) what passes as our objective historical and cultural existence."[5]

Every spectator comes to a film in a particular body marked by history, culture, and politics, and with a horizon of experiences in and knowledge of the world. Surely the particularities of one's body, experiences, and knowledge shape one's viewing of a film. But how? My account of my experiences of viewing *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed* are intended as an opening into an analysis of racial embodiment, emotion, and cinematic spectatorship.

There is now a significant body of scholarship that critically examines the representation of Asians and Asian Americans in U.S. cinema.[6] In contrast to these important works, which primarily take the cinematic text as their object of interrogation, in this article I wish to shift the emphasis to the experience of the spectator.[7] Theories and histories of spectators and spectatorship have been a longstanding part of film studies. Little of this scholarship explicitly considers the experiences of Asian Americans.[8] While Asian Americans share certain experiences with other racial minorities in the United States, such as their under- and mis-representation in mainstream media, there are also particular facets of Asian American life that are distinct and worthy of consideration. I acknowledge the diversity of Asian American communities in the U.S., which include not only individuals from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, but also differences in class, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliation, generation, and immigration status.[9] Nevertheless, I continue to use "Asian American spectator" as if it were a singular entity in order to highlight the shared racialization of Asian Americans in the U.S. context.

Furthermore, established studies of spectatorship, which frequently make use of psychoanalytic theories, do not typically foreground emotional responses to film.[10] Today, affect and emotion are increasingly seen as critical to not only cinematic spectatorship but also to many facets of everyday life. The significance of affect theory in recent humanities scholarship, especially literary theory, signals recognition of the importance of taking such issues into account in responses to texts.



Lee and Emery express their rejection of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* by standing up and walking out of the theater.



Bruce Lee changed the image of Asian men in the United States through his martial arts writings and teachings, and his films. This extreme close-up of Bruce Lee, from *Fist of Fury/Jing wu men* (also known as *The Chinese Connection*) (Lo Wei, 1972), is from one of his confrontations with the Japanese in the film.



Bruce Lee in mid-air as he destroys the "No Dogs and Chinese Allowed" sign from *Fist of Fury*.

My interest in understanding the emotional experience of cinematic spectatorship, and in particular the difference that embodied racial difference makes in this experience, has led me to phenomenology, or the philosophical study of experience, and cognitive film theory. Cognitive film theory is characterized by a focus upon the relation between film and spectator, and attention to the responses elicited by cinema. However, as many scholars have noted, it is not a single, unified theory of film but rather an approach to the study of film that draws upon many diverse disciplines, from philosophy to psychology to neuroscience. For example, Noël Carroll's well-known *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* uses analytic philosophy to examine the emotional effects of horror films, whereas Greg M. Smith relies on cognitive psychology in his book on emotion-elicitation in film, *Film Structure and the Emotion System*.[11]

Carroll and David Bordwell, in the introduction to their polemical anthology *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, write, "In turning from psychoanalytic doctrines, several of our authors move toward cognitive explanations of film reception." They go on to describe cognitivism as a "stance":

> "A cognitivist analysis or explanation seeks to understand human thought, emotion, and action by appeal to processes of mental representation, naturalistic processes, and (some sense of) rational agency. But in the process of studying these matters, rather sharp differences emerge."[12]

Like some of these authors, I have found psychoanalytic theory unable to answer the questions I wish to pose in this article, whereas a combination of phenomenology and cognitive film theory seems to offer a more productive way to approach the issues of emotion and racially embodied spectatorship that concern me here.

I begin with a brief overview of the philosophical study of racial embodiment and the relevance of this work for understanding film spectatorship. The main body of the article compares scenes from the film *Infernal Affairs* with their equivalents in the English-language, U.S.-based remake *The Departed*. I have chosen to focus upon these two films not only because they were the films that first raised the questions of this article for me, as a spectator and a scholar, but also because the comparison makes evident the potential pitfalls of U.S. films and the possible pleasures of Hong Kong action films for Asian American spectators.

I follow my analysis of these two feature-length fictional narrative films with a consideration of some of the work of experimental videomaker Valerie Soe, in particular her 1997 video *Beyond Asiaphilia*. Through the lens of *Beyond Asiaphilia*, which considers the pleasures of Hong Kong action films for Asian American spectators, I will suggest that an Asian American spectator watching *Infernal Affairs* may feel a kind of relaxation and joyful mobility in seeing similarly embodied subjects move through the world, despite the potential "foreignness" of many elements of the film. This feeling of being moved is in stark contrast to the tensed wariness that accompanies *The Departed*, in which, like many U.S. films, racial difference matters in a much more significant manner, and racist rhetoric may appear at any moment.

Seeing, knowing, and racial embodiment

How does it feel to move through the world in a "raced" body? The answer surely depends upon the time, place, and body at issue, but there is no question that such embodiment matters. Several philosophers have written about the experience of racial identity.[13] Linda Martín Alcoff, for example, has insisted upon the ways in which race and gender shape our sense of the world:

> "Racial and gendered identities are socially produced, and yet they are fundamental to our selves as knowing, feeling, and acting subjects. Raced and gendered identities operate as epistemological perspectives or horizons from which certain aspects or layers of reality are made visible."[14]

Thus, according to Alcoff, there is something specific in seeing and knowing as a raced and gendered subject. Emily S. Lee adds that the visibility of race shapes how others respond to a racially embodied subject, which in turn affects the raced subject's self-identity:

> "Externally because of the visibility of the different features of one's body, others gauge the appropriate responses to one's embodiment—formatively constructing the experiences one encounters. Internally, an accumulation of such experiences and events builds into a personal history to develop one's sense of self."[15]

Philosopher George Yancy argues,

> "The fact of the matter is that from the perspective of an oppressed and marginalized social position, Blacks do in fact possess a level of heightened sensitivity to recognizable and repeated occurrences that might very well slip beneath the radar of others who do not have such a place and history in a white dominant and hegemonic society."[16]

Yancy makes his point specifically in relation to African Americans, but his statement can be seen as a more particular instance of what both Alcoff and Lee suggest, that embodied racial identity affects both how one is seen and how one sees. However, this type of response is very much grounded in social context rather than existing as some essential feature of racial embodiment. As Yancy adds,

> "It is important to note that Black communities' perceptions are not in principle inaccessible to those not from them. In short, we can communicate the shared experiences, conceptual frameworks, and background assumptions to others if they are open to instruction and willing to take the time to listen."[17]

In applying these insights to the scene from *Dragon* referenced in the opening of the article, we might understand Lee's and Emery's differing initial responses to *Breakfast at Tiffany's* as an effect of their differing racial embodiments; Lee saw and felt, in a way that Emery did not at first, the racism of the Asian caricature.[18] The scene ends with Emery turning to Lee and suggesting, "Let's get out of here." Morris aptly sums up the interaction as promoting "the utopian potential of cinematic negotiation; reconciliation and deeper mutual understanding follow from going to the movies with Bruce Lee." She points out that a response such as Lee's might be met with rejection or dissent rather than understanding, yet the scene remains a significant representation of the operation of difference in the experience of watching a film.[19] While Emery's seemingly instantaneous recognition and understanding of Lee's rejection of the film may indeed be utopian, such a response is an example, albeit a fictional one, of how such perceptions can be communicated and shared.

In some ways, the works of the philosophers cited above merely confirm what many film scholars have already noted: spectators come to the viewing of a film with specific identities, experiences, and knowledge. But *how* do these particulars shape the experience of viewing a film? I turn to cognitive film theory to address this question. Cognitive film theory has not typically been associated with this type of investigation, and has in fact been criticized, by Robert Stam, for example, for its "stance of objective, apolitical neutrality" which misses "a sense of social and ideological contradiction." [20] However, there are cognitive film theorists whose work allows for the consideration of spectator difference even if they themselves do not take up the issue.

Per Persson intends his analysis of what he calls "(semi)universal dispositions" and their effects upon "shared understanding of certain layers of cinematic meaning" to stand in contrast to what he sees as the prioritization in cinema studies of differences of gender, ethnicity, and class.[21] However, his definition of "disposition" as that which creates "a framework within which the spectator can make sense of cues from the text" is not unlike Alcoff's "epistemological perspectives or horizons." Although Persson does not explicitly address racial identity as a factor in one's disposition, he does allow that,

> "Sharing dispositions means constructing similar meanings of a film; different dispositions lead to different understandings of the same film."[22]

This is a statement with which Alcoff as well as Yancy might very well agree.

Carl Plantinga, whose work I rely upon in the following section, begins his book-length study of emotion in cinema by setting his work apart from "academic film studies" which "has been focused almost entirely on ideological studies of film." He argues that this work "devalues the experience of movie viewing (as important only in relation to class, gender, race, etc.) and fails to see the centrality of emotion in the ideological work of movies." However, Plantinga concludes the book by acknowledging,

> "The effects of various extra-filmic factors, such as gender, ethnicity, race, class, age, and religious affiliation on the spectator's affective response is an important area of further study."[24]

Cognitive film theory therefore can allow for spectator difference, even if scholars in the field rarely consider them, while remaining uniquely suited to examining emotional responses to films. In what follows below I offer a preliminary exploration of the utility of cognitive film theory, specifically Plantinga's theory of how mainstream narrative films elicit affect as elaborated in his book *Moving Viewers*, for understanding racially embodied cinematic spectatorship.

Images from *Infernal Affairs:*



In *Infernal Affairs/Mou gaan dou* (Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002) Sam (Eric Tsang) greets the Thai drug trafficker (Chaucharew Wichai) warmly. They exchange pleasantries and joke about the weather.

Feeling stereotypes: *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed*

Infernal Affairs, the first of a trilogy of films, follows the parallel and eventually intersecting careers of an undercover policeman masquerading as a criminal, and a criminal mole who rises within the ranks of the Hong Kong police.[25] The film stars the famous Hong Kong actors Tony Chiu Wai Leung and Andy Lau. *The Departed* features Leonardo DiCaprio and Matt Damon as the two lead characters with Jack Nicholson in the role of the criminal kingpin. It maintains the basic narrative of the original and restages several of its key scenes, while incorporating some elements from the other two films of the trilogy and relocating the story from Hong Kong to Boston. *The Departed* also garnered Martin Scorsese his long awaited Academy Award for Best Director.



In a further show of friendship and respect, the Thai drug trafficker offers Sam a cigar, which he characterizes as “the best.”



The Hong Kong police monitor the drug deal from an apartment building across the street.

As crime dramas made in classical Hollywood style, both *Infernal Affairs* and *The Departed* keep viewers on the edge of their seats. Suspense is therefore the predominant “global emotion” of the two films, described by Plantinga as “emotions of extended duration,” with certain scenes generating heightened “local emotions” of excitement, suspense, surprise, and shock.[26] The unrestricted narration of both films gives spectators mostly omniscient perspectives, moving seamlessly between the operations of the police and those of the criminals. The character of the undercover policeman, played by Tony Leung in *Infernal Affairs* and Leonardo DiCaprio in *The Departed*, generates the bulk of the sympathetic emotion in the films, that is,

> “emotions [that] arise from the spectator’s assessment of a narrative situation primarily in relation to a character’s concerns, goals, and well-being.”[27]

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Images from *The Departed*:



In *The Departed* (Martin Scorsese, 2006), Chinese buyers for stolen microprocessors replace the Thai drug traffickers from *Infernal Affairs*. The Chinese buyers are initially introduced as silent, mysterious presences.



The menacing Chinese gangsters drift through the warehouse where the sale is to take place.



Soon after Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson) and his men first encounter the Chinese buyers, the leader of the Chinese (Robert Chan) inexplicably begins yelling in Cantonese and gesticulating wildly. His words are not translated within the diegesis of the film or through subtitles.

There are of course many differences between the Hong Kong film and its U.S. remake, but broader issues of cross-cultural adaptation and transnational circulation are beyond the scope of this essay.[28] [open notes in new window] Neither is it my intent to offer a close reading of either *Infernal Affairs* or *The Departed*.[29] Instead, as highlighted earlier, my focus in this essay is upon the spectator's experience of these films. Thus, I wish to consider two scenes in particular in *The Departed* that diverge from their corresponding scenes in *Infernal Affairs* in ways that an Asian American spectator might find significant.

Ed S. Tan, drawing upon the work of psychologist Nico Frijda, writes that

> "emotion regulates the interaction between the individual and the environment in that it is directed toward the realization of what is of importance to the individual, that is, his or her concerns."[30]

More succinctly, Plantinga defines emotions as "concern-based construals." He outlines seven different categories of emotions that come into play during the viewing of a film, distinguished mostly by their duration (global vs. local) and their objects (narrative content, characters, spectator responses, film as a constructed artifact).[31]

My argument is that in these two scenes from *The Departed*, Asian American spectators, due to their unique epistemological perspective, in Alcoff's terms, or even just heightened sensitivity as Yancy puts it, might experience a different set of "concern-based construals" than other spectators. Surely not all Asian American spectators will take note of the exact same elements of the scenes. My focus here is race but a spectator's disposition consists of much more than his or her racial identity. At the same time, Asian Americans may be more likely than other spectators to find certain elements of the film significant.

In the first scene, the police are presented with an opportunity to apprehend the head of the criminal gang in the process of illegal dealings. In *Infernal Affairs*, this involves Thai drug traffickers who arrive at a nondescript apartment building to sell cocaine to gang boss Sam (Eric Tsang) as the police monitor their activities from a building across the street. Although the Thai men dress and look different from the Chinese with whom they do business, their relationship appears to be a friendly one, with the men greeting each other warmly and joking about the weather.[32] The suspense of the scene comes from the moves and countermoves executed by the police and the criminal gang in their mutual attempts to outplay the other side, with spectators deriving considerable satisfaction from seeing the undercover policeman's clever use of Morse code as a means of communication.

In *The Departed*, the scene in question alternates between a warehouse, where the gang boss Frank Costello (Nicholson) has arranged to meet Chinese buyers for his stolen microprocessors, and an off-site surveillance center, where the police are monitoring the deal. There is a much more adversarial relationship between the business partners than in *Infernal Affairs*, and although the opening of the scene in *The Departed* pits the police against the criminals, much of the suspense of the scene derives from the confrontation between Costello's gang and the Chinese in the warehouse.

The Chinese buyers initially appear as silent, shadowy, sinister figures stationed throughout the warehouse, lit and filmed in a manner that depicts them as



Costello initially reacts with amusement to the Chinese leader's outburst.



The leader of the Chinese concludes with a challenging look. Because his words were not translated, non-Cantonese speakers have no idea what he said or why he is angry.



Costello responds by lecturing the Chinese with a condescending and offensive monologue about "how things are done in this country." He begins with the useful fact that machine guns "don't add inches to your dick" and then unleashes a series of racial epithets, calling the Chinese "Chinamen," "Bruce Lee and the karate kids," and "Chinks."



As the racially charged and hostile encounter continues, everyone prepares for possible violence. In *The Departed*, the conflict is primarily between Costello's gang and the Chinese buyers, which is in marked contrast to the scene in *Infernal Affairs*, which shows the Thai drug

threatening and capable of great violence. As Costello and his gang arrive on the scene, a bilingual Asian American man who acts as a translator informs Costello that at least two of the Chinese are carrying machine guns. The leader of the Chinese then inexplicably begins yelling in Cantonese and gesticulating forcefully. His words are not translated in their entirety either within the film or through subtitles. Costello responds by critiquing the behavior of the Chinese in terms of how things are done "in this country," beginning with the fact that automatic weapons "don't add inches to your dick."

The camera is placed in between the two sides with alternating medium close-ups of Costello and the unnamed Chinese boss, situating the spectator as a neutral third-party observer, witness to the escalating tension of the encounter. Costello's tirade continues as he goes from calling the buyers "Chinamen," to "Bruce Lee and the karate kids," to "Chinks." It then climaxes as he demands payment for the goods by launching one final insult at the Chinese: "No tickee, no laundry," a derogatory reference to nineteenth-century Chinese laundrymen. The police, meanwhile, have been rendered nearly irrelevant, relegated to the role of uninformed bystanders due to their hasty and ineffective surveillance set-up in the warehouse.

The narrative purpose of this sequence for both films is to place the criminals in direct confrontation with the police, and thus challenge the two main characters to do their jobs without giving away their true identities. While both films accomplish this goal, for Asian American spectators, *The Departed* includes an added point of significance that has to do with their possible association with the objects of Costello's derision. The Chinese buyers are merely the other party in the criminal transaction and thus arguably not intended to elicit much emotion at all from spectators, though Costello's behavior towards them may bring forth feelings of disapproval, surprise, or shock; it is not often these days in U.S. popular culture that one hears such overt expressions of anti-Asian racism, and the reference to Chinese laundrymen is surprisingly anachronistic.

Yet those spectators who may have been subject to epithets such as "Chinamen," "karate kid," or "Chink" at some point in their lives, or who have an awareness of their vulnerability to such incidents, may feel the force of Costello's insults differently from other spectators. Although a spectator's particular Asian ethnicity might affect her sense of such epithets, as the ones in the film primarily reference Chinese people, Asians in the United States have frequently been lumped into one group in that "Chink" or "Jap" or "gook" as much as "Oriental" have all been aimed indiscriminately at anyone with an Asian face.[33] For Asian American spectators, a recognition of their shared racial embodiment with the characters on the screen has the potential to elicit emotions that have to do with Asian American spectators' place, along with the Chinese buyers, within the racial hierarchy of the United States.[34]

Plantinga asks the question, "To what extent does spectator allegiance vary with spectator difference"?[35] By "allegiance," he means Murray Smith's theorization of the term. According to Smith, allegiance is one of three levels of a spectator's engagement with a film's characters, situated between recognition and alignment. Allegiance "pertains to the moral and ideological evaluation of characters by the spectator" on the basis of which "spectators construct *moral structures*, in which characters are organized and ranked in a system of preference."[36] Plantinga's version of the concept includes the possibility that spectators might feel an allegiance to characters for reasons that have little to do with morality, for example on the basis of a shared racial or ethnic identity, or a preference for the

traffickers and the Hong Kong criminals as friendly business partners united against the Hong Kong police.



Throughout the entire encounter between Costello and the Chinese buyers, the omniscient, objective camerawork places the spectator as a neutral, third-party observer. Some viewers, however, might feel more targeted by and vulnerable to Costello's insults than others.

Images from *Infernal Affairs:*



At a movie theater, Sam gives Lau (Andy Lau) the information he hopes will reveal the undercover policeman in his organization.



Yan (Tony Leung), the undercover policemen, covertly watches Sam and Lau from the back of the theater.

underdog or a familiar star.[37]

In regards to *The Departed*, do Asian American spectators grant allegiance to the Chinese because of their shared racial identity? I think not, as the Chinese buyers are such minor characters, with so little screen time and without names or (translated) dialogue, that it is difficult to imagine that they would generate allegiances of any kind. Furthermore, the Chinese give little indication of comprehending the import of Costello's words, whether due to lack of proficiency in the English language or lack of cultural familiarity with his references, so the feelings of the spectators are neither for nor with the Chinese buyers, who appear relatively unaffected by the encounter. The emotions that I am suggesting might arise from this scene are therefore not those of racially-based alignment or allegiance between Asian American spectators and the Chinese buyers. If only racially embodied spectatorship were so simple! I suggest, instead, that Asian American spectators are not engaging with these characters solely as characters within the film, but rather in relation to what their representation within the scene signifies within a culture of racial inequality.

In an essay about Asian American identity, anti-Asian stigmatization, and self-evaluative emotions, philosopher David Haekwon Kim proposes that anti-Asian stigmatization creates a social situation within which Asian Americans potentially experience "shameability" and "self-contemnability," terms he defines as "a distinctive vulnerability to being shamed or undergoing self-contempt." He identifies the most important forms of anti-Asian stigma as, "1) the aesthetic devaluation of Asian faces and bodies, 2) the derogation of alleged Asian personality traits, especially in terms of passivity, non-individuality, and social ineptness, and 3) the derogation of alleged Asian foreignness, alienness, or being a FOB (Fresh Off the Boat)." Kim is careful to clarify that his argument is not that all Asian Americans suffer from racial shame or self-contempt, but rather that anti-Asian racism is a feature of the public order that has emotional effects upon Asian Americans.[38]

Suppose that Asian Americans are indeed more vulnerable to being shamed or undergoing self-contempt as a result of anti-Asian stigmatization. If Costello's attitude towards the Chinese buyers reiterates the existing racial hierarchy in the United States, then Asian American spectators may respond to the scene with feelings of shame and self-contempt. Plantinga argues that films rarely elicit a sense of collective guilt or shame because viewers do not feel responsible for the actions of fictional characters, and indeed Asian American spectators are not likely to feel responsible for the Chinese buyers' behavior.[39] However, the scene reaffirms that Asians can be seen and treated as a despised racial minority in the United States, and Asian American spectators in particular are especially aware that this treatment is not limited to the fictional world of the film.

As Kim suggests, shame

> "might be a result of coming into a world in which one is in some sense a failed or diminished subject well before arriving in it, precisely like the situation faced by the racially stigmatized. When this is the case, the lowered view of the self is not the result of considerations of flawed agency but of flawed being."[40]

Such self-evaluative emotions of shame and self-contempt require an internalization of anti-Asian stigmatization. For those spectators who explicitly challenge anti-Asian stigmatization, the emotions elicited by the scene may be turned outwards, towards the characters or situation in the film, or even toward the filmmakers. Costello, for example, may be viewed with even more intense antipathetic emotion, with hatred instead of mere disapproval for example, as his words rebound upon the spectator's own sense of self. Asian Americans who are



As Lau departs the theater a tense scene ensues as Yan follows closely behind in an attempt to learn the identity of the criminal mole in the police force.



The suspense of the scene is accentuated by camerawork that alternates between showing one character and then the other, along with a rhythmic musical score that highlights the tension created by the editing and cinematography.



Some shots include both men in the same frame —Yan is visible as the blurry figure in the background—to show how close they are to each other. No other people are shown in the chase sequence. The pursuit is suddenly interrupted by the high-pitched trill of Yan's cell phone ringing, which forces him to cut short his pursuit as Lau is alerted to his presence.

Images from *The Departed:*



firmly invested in their American identities may feel contempt towards the Chinese buyers, for confirming "alleged Asian foreignness" and for actually being FOBs. (This response would have the paradoxical effect of affirming Costello's perspective.) Asian Americans who identify more strongly with an ethnic rather than a racial identity might take note of the representation yet consider it relevant only to Chinese Americans.

Whatever emotions any given individual Asian American spectator experiences in response to this scene, Asian American spectators as a group find themselves implicated in the onscreen interaction in ways that other spectators are not. Each of the responses outlined above moves beyond the world of the film. These are not "direct emotions," which have to do with the spectator's engagement with the unfolding narrative, nor just "sympathetic or antipathetic emotions," related to the spectator's feelings about the characters within the film, but rather what Plantinga calls "meta-emotions" and "artifact emotions."[41]

"Meta-emotions" are emotions whose object is the spectator's own responses or those of other spectators, while "artifact emotions" derive from some response to the film as a constructed artifact. The example Plantinga gives of a meta-emotion is crying at a sentimental scene, and then feeling embarrassed about having cried.[42] In this scene from *The Departed*, Asian American spectators might initially respond with emotions elicited by the recognition of their own vulnerability to racist sentiments. Having one's racial identity highlighted in this manner may be described as akin to being frozen in place with a spotlight shining upon one's dark hair, slanted eyes, and yellow skin. The feelings such attention elicits can range from embarrassment to indignation to alarm. Such emotions, which derive from a larger cultural context of anti-Asian stigma, then lead to further felt consequences, from meta-emotions of anger, frustration, or resignation to shame or self-contempt.

Examples of artifact emotion, according to Plantinga, include "exhilaration at a particularly brilliant camera movement, disdain for a hackneyed screenplay, anger at the seeming contempt the filmmakers have for the audience, or admiration for the excellence of a film."[43] For those spectators who have knowledge of the frequent representation of Asian characters in U.S. films as targets of condescension and loathing, *The Departed*'s representation of the Chinese buyers may elicit the artifact emotions of anger, frustration, indignation, disappointment, or resignation. Narratively speaking, there is little rationale for the racial or national identity of the buyers in this scene; not much in the story would have changed if the buyers were French or Russian, for example. Perhaps Scorsese intended the Chinese gangsters as an intertextual reference to the world of Hong Kong action films, but in the context of an U.S. setting and within the history of Hollywood cinema, the intertextual frame equally recalls the depiction of Asians as stereotypical stock characters, such as gangsters.

Aside from the scene in the warehouse, there is one other scene in *The Departed* that explicitly triggers the recognition of how the filmmakers have deliberately chosen to use "Asian" as a signifier within the film. This second scene takes place at a movie theater, as the undercover policeman trails the criminal mole and nearly identifies him but for an inopportune cell phone ring. This is an intensely suspenseful scene in both films, with camerawork that repeats a pattern of following one man and then the other, and then including both men in the same frame in order to show how little distance separates the two. The scene in *Infernal Affairs* takes place at a generic theater showing what Gina Marchetti speculates is

At a porn theater in Chinatown, Costello charges Colin (Matt Damon) with finding the rat in his gang.



Billy (Leonardo DiCaprio), the undercover policeman, covertly watches Costello and Colin from the back of the theater.



Billy's pursuit of Colin takes them into the streets of Chinatown.



The chase continues into a mysterious Chinatown alley.

a film from the People's Republic of China set in Mongolia or Tibet.[44] This setting allows the spectator to focus upon the action in *Infernal Affairs*, namely the excitement of the pursuit and the suspense of whether or not the undercover police agent will finally discover the identity of the criminal mole.

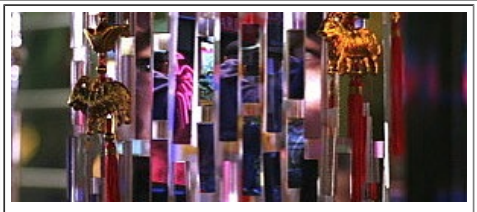
The Departed locates this scene in a porn theater in Chinatown and includes a more extended chase sequence in the neighboring environs. For many spectators familiar with U.S. popular culture, the mise-en-scène of the chase quite likely brings memories, whether conscious or unconscious, of scenes from other films and television shows set in the mysterious alleyways of "Chinatown," that well-worn Hollywood set featuring some combination of opium dens, gambling, sex, and murder. The steam rising from the street vents, the barbecued ducks hanging in the shop windows, the exotic neon hieroglyphics casting their garish light upon the rain-slicked sidewalks... It all seems so familiar.[45]

Spectators acquainted with these signifiers may feel a sense of heightened mystery and danger based upon repeated exposure to similar settings and their associations with specific narrative scenarios. Such repetition, whose effects once again can be conscious or unconscious, might compound the excitement of the scene. But spectators who are more sensitive to the explicit use of such racialized tropes may feel critical of the filmmaker's decision to rely upon such stereotypical representations of "Chinatown" as a space of violence. This type of awareness of the film as a constructed text leads once again to artifact emotions, feelings that in this case derive from a critical consciousness of the clichéd choice of Chinatown as a setting for the scene, without any apparent narrative rationale.

My focus upon two scenes from a two-and-a-half-hour film may seem rather narrow, but these scenes are emblematic of the way that Asians have been represented in U.S. cinema for over a century. Over and over again, in U.S. films that are often not even "about" Asians or Asian Americans, spectators are confronted with similar types of images. There are certainly many moments in *Infernal Affairs* when the viewing pleasure of an Asian American spectator may be challenged: the labor of reading subtitles, the unusually heightened melodrama of the relationship between the undercover cop and his superior officer, the remarkably chaste interactions between the undercover cop and the psychologist he is assigned to see. Yet given the homogenous racial makeup of the film's actors, racial difference does not register as a factor, and American-style racism is nowhere to be seen.



You can always find roast duck hanging in the windows of Chinatown shops, even late at night after the shops are closed. The mise-en-scène and cinematography of the Chinatown chase sequence in *The Departed* is reminiscent of many other chase sequences set in Chinatown in U.S. popular film and television.



An elaborate mirrored hanging lantern reflects Billy's face and Colin from the back. The lantern seems vaguely familiar—was there one in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947), which was filmed in part in San Francisco's Chinatown?

This is not to say that national, cultural, or other differences between the characters are insignificant. For spectators who are more knowledgeable about Hong Kong and its history and culture, or simply more familiar with Hong Kong cinema, some of the details that Marchetti discusses in her in-depth study of the

Infernal Affairs trilogy may be very significant. The history of the song in the stereo shop scene, the tensions between the PRC and Hong Kong as expressed through characters and background events, the influence of the triads, or the role of Thailand in the regional drug trade may be quite meaningful for some spectators. But many Americans, including Asian Americans, will not be familiar enough with the cultural context or the cinematic tradition to understand such distinctions.



An innocent deliveryman is mistaken by Colin for Billy and accidentally knifed. This brutal act, which does not occur in *Infernal Affairs*, adds to the association of Chinatown with violence.

In a film set in the United States, it is much more difficult to depict a world where Asian embodiment, or any other form of racial difference, is not meaningful. The fact that the characters in *The Departed* express strong attitudes towards race, class, gender, and sexual identities is a strength of the film in many ways, part of a richly textured portrayal of white working class Bostonians. Yet the way in which the film orients itself around certain kinds of bodies and not others also makes itself felt by the spectator. In an analysis of the phenomenology of whiteness, Sara Ahmed writes,

> "whiteness may function as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in; the surfaces of social space are already impressed upon by the shape of such bodies."[46]



Colin is able to walk away from Chinatown, past the Chinese stone guardian lion at the corner, before Billy can identify him.

Despite the fact that the world of a film is an imaginary or virtual one, in that it is a flickering image of light and shadow on a screen rather than the fully three-dimensional arena, this diegetic space is still shaped by the bodies within it.

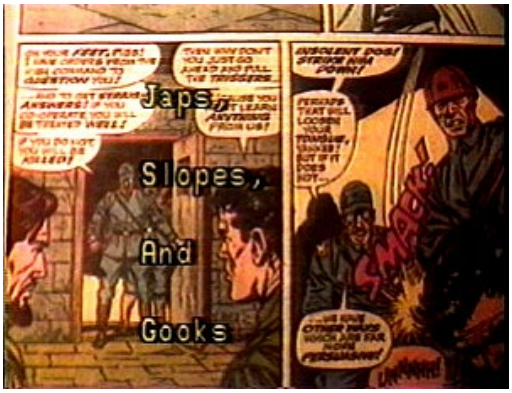
In the all-Asian milieu of *Infernal Affairs*, Asian embodiment is the norm and racial difference is not at issue. Asian American spectators are free to be fully immersed in the suspense of the film, in its dramatic action sequences and its shocking denouement. In *The Departed*, where race is marked as a site of contestation, Asian embodiment and the Chinatown setting are depicted as foreign and distant, subject to or spaces of violence and abuse. While the experience of seeing a film like *The Departed* may be quite familiar to Asian American spectators, it is hardly surprising that something like *Infernal Affairs* may be far more pleasurable.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Beyond Asiaphilia: Hong Kong cinema and Asian American spectators



In Valerie Soe's experimental video *New Year* (1987), "Japs, Slopes and Gooks" introduces a series of clips from films set during U.S. wars in Asia.



Charlie Chan was known for his pithy Eastern aphorisms, often prefaced by "Confucius say…"

My analysis thus far has concentrated on the experience of Asian American spectators watching *The Departed*. As I hope I have demonstrated, Asian American spectators may respond negatively to instances of racialized representation in the film that accord with existing discourses of anti-Asian stigmatization. In contrast, films like *Infernal Affairs* could allow Asian American spectators the comfort of moving in a space shaped by bodies like their own. I now turn to a more detailed consideration of the potential pleasures of Hong Kong action cinema for Asian American spectators through the viewfinder of Valerie Soe's experimental video *Beyond Asiaphilia* (1997).

Given the historical, political, economic, and cultural complexities of the history of Asians in the U.S., the idea that Asian cinema can provide a more pleasurable viewing experience for Asian American spectators than Hollywood films is hardly a simple issue. This could be seen as ceding Hollywood and its significant economic and cultural influence to the forces of white hegemony. Furthermore, it risks fraying the distinction between "Asian" and "Asian American" that many have sought to maintain, for good reason.

As Dorinne Kondo has written,

> "I am deeply invested in keeping separate "Asian" and "Asian American," for the confusion of these terms has produced some of the most egregious incidents of racism in this country's history, events that touch the lives of all Asian Americans. But precisely because there is an elision of Asian with Asian American, *About Face* [Kondo's book about performing race in fashion and theater] centers around the ways hegemonic representations, mostly of Asia, reverberate in Asian American lives. The Orientalisms deployed at one site produce effects in others."[47]
> [open notes in new window]

Although Kondo does not specifically mention films in this citation, popular cinematic representations of Asia and Asians undoubtedly "reverberate in Asian American lives."

Several of Valerie Soe's videos address the representation of Asians in U.S. popular culture. In the first half of *New Year* (1987), Soe uses hand-drawn illustrations, voice-over narration, text, and photographs to convey the experience of moving to a mostly white suburb and being tasked with explaining her family's Lunar New Year celebrations to her elementary school classmates. The second half of the video collects images of Asians in U.S. popular visual culture, organized by stereotype, that her neighbors and classmates might have been familiar with at the time. Soe would once again utilize this aesthetic strategy of recontextualizing and politicizing popular culture, which she traces to the Situationist International's concept of *detournement*, in *Picturing Oriental Girls: A (Re)Educational Videotape* (1992). In an essay about the political and artistic motivations behind her work Soe writes,



The “Geisha Girls and Dragon Ladies” section in *New Year* highlights the representation of Asian women as either submissive, sexual playthings or evil, manipulative schemers.



A scene from *The World of Suzy Wong* (Richard Quine, 1960) is included in a section about Asian women as artistic muses in Valerie Soe’s *Picturing Oriental Girls: A (Re)Educational Videotape* (1992). Each film clip features an Asian woman being painted, or written on, by a white male character.

> “By starting with images and methods from mainstream artistic sources and turning them around, *detournement* alters and revises the meaning and intent of even the most disposable popular culture.”[48]

Picturing Oriental Girls, which interrogates the representation of Asian women, edits together clips from some two dozen popular media texts, primarily feature-length films though also including television shows and one music video, in order to highlight certain recurring tropes. The video begins with the representation of Asian women as creative muses; there are a surprising number of films with scenes of white male characters painting and/or writing upon the bodies of Asian women. There are also representations of Asian women acting aggressively and being punished with startlingly brutal violence, the “dragon lady” stereotype, and of course a selection of clips showing the hypersexualized exotic and erotic Asian woman. These excerpts, which make their point through the sheer force of repetition, are frequently overlaid with choice quotations from two mail order bride catalogs and a 1990 British *GQ* article proclaiming “Oriental Girls: The Ultimate Accessory.” Although the entire video is only ten and a half minutes long, the accumulation of similar images and text clearly demonstrates the pervasiveness of these stereotypes.



In *Picturing Oriental Girls*, this scene from *Tai-Pan* (Daryl Duke, 1986) is overlaid with text from Sunshine International Correspondence, a company that facilitated communication for the purpose of starting relationships between Asian women and American men.



Picturing Oriental Girls juxtaposes a scene from *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (Daniel Mann, 1956) of a geisha named Lotus Blossom (Machiko Kyo) with text proclaiming the beauty and values of Asian women.





Picturing Oriental Girls connects the Western stereotype of the geisha girl from *The Teahouse of the August Moon* (1956) to Puccini's famous opera *Madama Butterfly* (1904) and the musical *Miss Saigon* (1989) which is based on *Madama Butterfly* but set in Saigon during the Vietnam War.	"Mother" Gin Sling (Ona Munson), from *The Shanghai Gesture* (Josef von Sternberg, 1941), is featured in *Picturing Oriental Girls* as an example of the treacherous Asian women who is punished by a violent death.

Mixed Blood (1992), about interracial relationships, is composed of interviews with Asian Americans and mixed race couples speaking about the complex realities of interracial desire and intercultural engagement. The video contrasts their words with clips from Hollywood films such as *Sayonara* (Joshua Logan, 1957), which romanticizes the pairing of white men and Asian women, and *The Crimson Kimono* (Samuel Fuller, 1959), which was remarkable for portraying James Shigeta as the romantic lead, in love with a white American woman.[49]



An image from a trailer for *The Crimson Kimono* (Samuel Fuller, 1959) reproduced in Valerie Soe's *Mixed Blood* (1992) represents James Shigeta's desire for a white American woman as unusual and "strange."

Soe's critique of representations of Asians in popular U.S. media was thus well established by the time she made *Beyond Asiaphilia*, which, like many of her earlier works, references numerous films. This time, however, the purpose of these cinematic quotations is quite different. *Beyond Asiaphilia* has two distinct, though related, threads. The first considers Soe's love for Hong Kong action films in the context of her autobiography and romantic history. Second, interwoven with Soe's biographical and cinematic reminiscences, a number of Asian American men are interviewed about their interest in Hong Kong action cinema. The films Soe cites in the video are therefore a source of appreciation and affection, not the subjects of criticism and anger. Although *Beyond Asiaphilia* is an experimental video rather than an ethnographic study, it nevertheless offers an intriguing glimpse of how a handful of actual Asian American spectators derive pleasure from Hong Kong action films.

The "Asiaphilia" in the title of Soe's video has had largely negative connotations. Darrell Y. Hamamoto defines Asiaphilia as:

> "The fetishization of all things Asian in popular culture—owing in part to the rise of Hong Kong cinema, with its commanding, action-oriented personalities; the ubiquity of female Asian American television-news anchors and fashion models in the U.S. media; Asian food faddism among many urban professionals; and the acceptance by young people of such imports as anime (Japanese animation)."



A film clip of Chow Yun-fat opens Valerie Soe's *Beyond Asiaphilia* (1997) as a woman's voice-over tells us that after seven years with her Caucasian partner, she has fallen in love with a Chinese man.



Soe appreciates Hong Kong action films for their dramatic cinematic language and their men, who are charismatic characters with good haircuts who wear their clothes well and have a compelling physical presence.



Jay Chan, pictured here in front of a Bruce Lee poster and with his image superimposed over a clip of Bruce Lee, enjoys seeing Lee winning the fight.

In contrast to more overtly racist attitudes and practices, Asiaphilia might seem relatively harmless, perhaps even a positive sign of increasing cultural openness. Yet, Hamamoto argues,

> "Asiaphilia is a deceptively benign ideological construct that naturalizes and justifies the systematic appropriation of cultural property and expressive forms created by Yellow people."[50]

But what if the "appropriators" are themselves of Asian ethnic heritage?

Beyond Asiaphilia begins with a television screen showing a scene from an action film featuring a handsome Asian male lead. A woman confesses in voice-over: "After seven years with my Caucasian partner I've fallen in love with a Chinese man." She lists the Chinese man's numerous good qualities—tall, suave, and honorable, among others—before identifying him as Hong Kong movie star Chow Yun-fat. We soon learn that the voice at the outset belongs to the maker of the video, and that the "love affair" is not exactly with another man, but rather with a cinematic genre: Hong Kong action films. From this intriguing beginning, with its suggestion of an interracial love triangle, the video goes on to address issues of race, gender, sexuality, and cinema through a combination of autobiography, interviews, and a generous assortment of film clips.

Shortly after the opening sequence, an off-screen interviewer (Patrick Macias) asks Soe, who appears onscreen, why she likes Hong Kong movies. She begins by highlighting their dramatic cinematic language before describing the men who star in them:

> "They're just so incredibly charismatic, they know how to carry themselves on the screen, they're really physical, they move well, they model it, they have good haircuts, they wear their clothes well, everything that these guys in American movies are not."

Much of this commentary is presented in voiceover as scenes from several Hong Kong films play, lending visual support to her words.

Although her response might initially seem to emphasize the superficial appearance of the stars, it touches upon much more than the simple pleasures of seeing good-looking men with flattering haircuts and nice clothing. There is also the quality of on-screen charisma, which suggests the ability to effectively inhabit and move through the space of the screen. She concludes her remarks by describing these men as the very opposite of the Asian men in U.S. movies. The difference is not simply between stereotypical and non-stereotypical onscreen characters, nor is her response only a desire for more "positive" representations.



In *Beyond Asiaphi*lia, LiPo Ching marvels at how Bruce Lee made Asian men appealing.



A series of English-language magazines with covers featuring Hong Kong movie stars accumulate as evidence of Asiaphilia.

	
Marcus Chun speculates that, in regards to Asiaphilia, the person in question is probably not Asian, yet has an unexplainable predilection for all things Asian, “like martial arts” and “Asian women who are so servile and give good massage,” said with a sarcastic laugh.	The videomaker details her own obsessive interest in Hong Kong action films, then concludes by wondering, “Is it even logistically possible that I am this Asiaphiliac now, and I am an Asian person”?

What might be described as the contrast between the physical presence that Soe appreciates in Hong Kong action film stars such as Chow Yun-fat and Jet Li, and the lack of such embodiment in most of the Asian male characters in U.S. films, is also present in Soe’s recollections of her experience growing up in a mostly white suburb of San Francisco. Following reminiscences of her childhood sprinkled with what appear to be images from home movies, Soe notes that she knew very few Asian American men other than her brothers and cousins until she met the “FOB guys” that her sister dated while in high school.[51] She describes them as “visually striking,” in Angels Flight pants, shirts with long bell sleeves, and feathered hair, chain-smoking and “completely comfortable with themselves.”

The segment concludes with speculation about what was different about these young men:

> “part of it was that they were from Hong Kong, and they grew up in a majority culture and, you know, they liked themselves. I think that was really different from what the other Asian guys that I knew felt.”

This comparison echoes Soe’s earlier contrast between Hong Kong action film stars and Asian men in American movies. The recollection ends on this observation, leaving the viewer to ponder the differences between growing up in Hong Kong as a member of the majority versus in the United States as a member of the minority. How might this distinction be reflected in the sense of self of a person, not to mention in the cinematic productions of each place?

For Soe, the onscreen physical presence of Hong Kong action film stars has the effect of turning these men into objects of desire. For the male interviewees of *Beyond Asiaphilia*, their feeling in watching Hong Kong action cinema is rather one of identification, and an affirming effect upon their own sense of self. In a series of short interview excerpts, young Asian American men share what they enjoy about Hong Kong films. The men are framed mostly in medium close-up or close-up shots, superimposed against clips of Hong Kong action films, or against backgrounds with objects (e.g. posters) related to Hong Kong cinema. They all express some degree of disappointment with the representation of Asians in Hollywood, whether in terms of simple lack or in the quality of the characterizations. The pleasures of Hong Kong action films for them include seeing Asians in leading roles and seeing Asians winning fights.



Hong Kong action films have the power to move audiences, as in this clip of Jet Li in *The Legend/Fong sai yuk* (Corey Yuen, 1993) included in *Beyond Asiaphilia*.

The significance of these films in their lives is evident in the expressions on their faces and the tone of their voices as they speak. For some of the interviewees, their rejection of Hollywood and embrace of Hong Kong is intensely personal. One interviewee tells a story of being approached by a woman after a screening of a Bruce Lee film and being told, "Oh, I just love you guys!" and marveling at how Lee made Asian men appealing. Another young Asian American man says about Bruce Lee:

> "I like talking about him because he's such, um, a sexy character, you know. The way in which he sort of sheds his shirt every chance he gets, the way he flexes his muscles. So I like that aspect of him. He sort of goes against the stereotype of the nerdy, asexual Asian guy."

For these men, the images on the screen have a direct effect upon the way in which they see themselves and are seen by others.

Beyond Asiaphilia directly addresses "Asiaphilia" near its conclusion. A stack of English-language periodicals featuring Asian film stars on their covers, including *Giant Robot*, *A.*, and *Time Out: New York*, suggests the popularity of Asian cinema in the U.S. The off-screen questioner says to Soe, "Tell me about Asiaphilia." She describes someone with Asiaphilia as a person who is "inordinately obsessed with Asian culture." A male interviewee follows up by adding that someone with Asiaphilia probably isn't Asian, while a third respondent recalls a non-Asian woman he knew who was "into Asian guys so much that she wanted to have a kid who was half-Asian." Soe then details the specifics of her own engagement with Hong Kong action films, including shopping for films at Canto-pop record stores, watching Chinese movies on satellite television even though they lacked subtitles, and going to the Great Star Theater (a San Francisco Chinatown theater). She concludes by saying,

> "It's become kind of this weird obsession. Is it even logistically possible that I am this Asiaphiliac now, and I'm an Asian person?"

The video does not answer this question.

Soe and the Asian American men interviewed in her video were hardly alone in their appreciation of Chow Yun-fat and other Hong Kong film stars. *Beyond Asiaphilia* was produced during the explosion of interest in Hong Kong action cinema in the U.S. in the 1990s. David Desser has argued for the recognition of a "new cinephilia" beginning in the late 1980s and centered on Hong Kong action films, writing,

> "The cult popularity of John Woo, in particular, but Hong Kong action cinema in general (the films of Tsui Hark, the star personae of Jet Li, Chow Yun-fat, even Jackie Chan in this period) is, I argue, the driving force of the new cinephilia."[52]

He later describes the subject of this new lover of cinema as "a type of white, adolescent male subject in Euro-America who soon found himself identifying with non-white and (outside of John Woo's cinema) female characters," that is, an "Asianized" Euro-American subject.[53]

Desser is primarily interested in analyzing the technological conditions of this

new cinephilia, which was made possible by the availability of films in VHS, VCD, and affordable DVD formats, and the existence of a wide range of Internet discussion forums and online modes of cinematic circulation and consumption. These conditions allowed Soe and the interviewees of *Beyond Asiaphilia* to see Hong Kong films, yet they are not, obviously, the white adolescent male subjects that Desser describes. Hamamoto would probably see this Euro-American love of Hong Kong action films as a clear example of the Asiaphilia he so strongly critiques, and these fans seem to fit the general understanding of Asiaphilia expressed in Soe's video as well. Are Asian American fans of Hong Kong action films any different?

Hong Kong action films and their stars present an idealized vision of Asians in action, of bodies that move through spectacular scenes of gunfights and martial arts choreography. David Bordwell has written of Hong Kong films,

> "Cinema is particularly good at arousing emotions kinesthetically, through action and music... When this quality is captured in vigorous, strictly patterned movement, in nicely judged framings and crackling cutting, with overwhelming music and sound effects, you can feel yourself tensing and twitching to the rhythms of the fight."[54]

Aaron Anderson's analyses of filmed martial arts combat through kinesthetics and dance theory offer another perspective upon the ability of certain Hong Kong films to physically and mentally engage viewers.[55]

These scholars and others persuasively describe and analyze the unique ability of Hong Kong action films to involve the viewer, and in each instance, these films represent something that Asian American spectators hardly ever see or feel in U.S. cinema: the desirable Asian body effectively moving through the diegetic world. Unlike the repetitive and yet never changing stereotype analyzed by Homi Bhabha, these are characters in motion in the world of the film.[56] Desser's white, male, adolescent "new cinephiles" have the opportunity to see bodies like their own in action on screens everywhere and every day. While any viewer can appreciate the artistry of a Hong Kong action film, such films do not have the same intellectual or emotional significance for all viewers. Regardless of whether the Euro-American fans are seen as appropriating Hong Kong cinema or merely enjoying its achievements, such films cannot have the same significance for them as for Asian American fans.



The banner from Valerie Soe's ongoing blog *beyond asiaphilia*: https://beyondasiaphilia.com/

In the context of Soe's earlier videos, *Beyond Asiaphilia* suggests that Hong Kong action films can be seen as an alternative for Asian American spectators to mainstream U.S. media. At one point in the video, a young Asian American man says as much: "For a while it was sort of like oh, there's no Asians in Hollywood, but now it doesn't matter because you can just watch Hong Kong movies." Indeed, why bother with Hollywood when you have Hong Kong (or Japan or Korea or India)? The "beyond" of the video's title signals an engagement with Asian culture that is not merely superficial fetishization but rather... Well, what exactly? If Asiaphilia is an inordinate love of all things Asian, often attributed to non-Asians and characterized as an unseemly racial fetishization, what does it mean to move "beyond"?



Yan confronts Lau on a rooftop in an arresting image from the dramatic denouement of *Infernal Affairs*, with Hong Kong in the background. How

The fact that Soe's ongoing blog, *beyondasiaphilia*, an award-winning "repository for [Soe's] thoughts on Asian/American arts, culture, and other related topics," is titled after her 1997 video testifies to the continuing significance of Asian popular cinema in Soe's life.[57] Nearly two decades later, through her blog, Soe offers reports from the Hong Kong International Film Festival, thoughtful reviews of many of the Asian films that play in the Bay Area, and other posts about Asian/American cultural production. Although Hong Kong cinema is no longer the cultural force that it was in the 1980s and 1990s, there is arguably more Asian

can films provide immersive, engaging, and moving experiences for all spectators?

popular culture, including cinema, available in the U.S. than ever before. Watching Asian films will not solve the challenges of racial embodiment in the U.S. for Asian American subjects. However, a better understanding of the pleasures that films like *Infernal Affairs* can offer to Asian American spectators is a useful point of departure for further research into how racial embodiment shapes the filmgoing experience, and how films might come to provide immersive, engaging, and moving experiences for all spectators.

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Notes

1. According to Gordon H. Chang, Mr. Yunioshi is a caricature of the Japanese American painter Yasuo Kuniyoshi. Gordon H. Chang, "Emerging from the Shadows: The Visual Arts and Asian American History," in *Asian American Art: A History*, 1850-1970, ed. Gordon H. Chang, Mark Dean Johnson, and Paul J. Karlstrom (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 10. [return to page 1]

2. For a history of yellowface performances, see Karla Rae Fuller, *Hollywood Goes Oriental: CaucAsian Performances in American Film* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2010). The recent BuzzFeed Video "East Asians Watched Yellowface and It Will Make You Cringe" shows the continuing relevance of the issue. Chris Lam and Candace Lowry, "East Asians Watched Yellowface and It Will Make You Cringe," *Buzzfeed*, July 30, 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/chrislam/east-asians-react-to-yellowface?utm_term=.qddKPb6oa#.xewZKAJL4, accessed August 4, 2015.

3. For critical assessments of Bruce Lee's legacy, see Sylvia Chong, *The Oriental Obscene: Violence and Racial Fantasies in the Vietnam Era* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) and Celine Parreñas Shimizu, *Straitjacket Sexualities: Unbinding Asian American Manhoods in the Movies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

4. Meaghan Morris, "Learning from Bruce Lee: Pedagogy and Political Correctness in Martial Arts Cinema," in *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies*, ed. Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo (New York: Routledge, 2001), 180-181.

5. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2004), 6.

6. For a brief but comprehensive overview of the history and current state of Asian American film and media studies, see Kent A. Ono, "'Lines of Flight': Reterritorializing Asian American Film and Media Studies," *American Quarterly* 64.4 (December 2012): 885-897. For an introduction to Asian Americans and the media, see Kent A. Ono and Vincent Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009).

7. In this article, I follow Carl Plantinga's using the term "spectator" not in its narrow sense within screen theory but rather as interchangeable with "viewer" and "audience" to refer to actual people or hypothetical roles or positions depending on the context. Carl Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 17.

8. Notable exceptions include: Peter X. Feng, "Recuperating Suzie Wong: A Fan's Nancy Kwan-dary," in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 40-56; Eve Oishi, "Visual Perversions: Race, Sex, and Cinematic Pleasure,"

Signs 31.3 (Spring 2006): 641-674; and Hye Seung Chung, *Hollywood Asian: Philip Ahn and the Politics of Cross-Ethnic Performance* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

9. In the U.S., since the late 1960s, the term "Asian American" has been used to refer to a wide range of ethnic groups of Asian ancestry by both the U.S. government and U.S. society at large, as well as by people of Asian ancestry wishing to mobilize as a group. "Pan-Asian American ethnicity," according to Yen Le Espiritu, "is the development of bridging organizations and solidarities among several ethnic and immigrant groups of Asian ancestry." At the same time, "Although subject to the same general prejudice and similar discriminatory laws, Asians in the United States have rarely conceived of themselves as a single people, and many still do not." Espiritu's important book traces the history of the construction of "Asian American" as well as the tensions surrounding such a mobilization in terms of the distribution of power and resources. Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 14. See also Lisa Lowe's "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Asian American Differences" for an influential account of the multiple ways in which Asian Americans differ from each other. Lowe, Chapter 3 of *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 60-83.

10. As Lisa Cartwright has written, "Feeling is a suspect area of research for media and film scholars, who, since the time of Brechtian distantiation and Althusserian apparatus theory, have worked to institute models that allow us to resist the seductive pull of the medium as it moves us to feel for the other." Although her emphasis is on feeling *for* the other, while mine in this article is upon feeling *as* the other, the scholarly suspicion of feeling moved remains the same. Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 4. See Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship*, for a thorough overview of theories of cinematic spectatorship. *The Audience Studies Reader* gives a useful sampling of audience studies approaches. Jackie Stacey's book *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994) productively combines psychoanalysis with ethnography.

11. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

12. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll, "Introduction" to *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies, ed. David Bordwell and* Noël Carroll (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), xvi.

13. In addition to the works cited in the following paragraphs, see Charles Johnson, "A Phenomenology of the Black Body," in *The Male Body: Features, Destinies, Exposures*, ed. Laurence Goldstein (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 121-136 and the work of the contributors to *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, ed. Emily S. Lee (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014). I thank Scott Richmond for sharing the latter reference with me.

14. Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 126.

15. Lee, introduction to *Living Alterities*, 7.

16. George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), 7.

17. Ibid., 9

18. As Meaghan Morris notes though, Lee's response depends upon a generalized "Asian" identity that not all spectators find convincing. In Australia, she writes, some viewers "express incredulity that the real Bruce Lee would ever have 'seen himself' in a Japanese stereotype at all." In a U.S. context however, given the history and development of "Asian American" as a pan-ethnic term, Lee's response is not so surprising. Morris, "Learning from Bruce Lee," 182. See also Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

19. Morris, "Learning from Bruce Lee," 182.

20. Robert Stam, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 240, 242.

21. Per Persson, *Understanding Cinema: A Psychological Theory of Moving Imagery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 17.

22. Ibid., 35.

23. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 4-5.

24. Ibid., 223.

25. Although *Infernal Affairs* (2002) was the first film to be released, in terms of the chronology of the overall narrative the events of the film take place between *Infernal Affairs II* (2003) and *Infernal Affairs III* (2003). Gina Marchetti offers plot summaries of all three films in Appendix 1 in Marchetti, *Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's Infernal Affairs—The Trilogy* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2007), 169-176.

26. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 68.

27. Ibid., 72.

28. See Nicholas Holm, "Ex(or)cising the Spirit of Japan: *Ringu*, *The Ring*, and the Persistence of Japan," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 39:4 (2011): 183-192 for a comparison between a Japanese horror film and its U.S. remake. The edited anthology *Hong Kong Connections* offers a useful series of essays about the global circulation of Hong Kong action cinema since the 1960s: Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu, ed., *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005 and Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005). Other books that address the global circulation of Hong Kong action cinema include: Kenneth Chan, *Remade in Hollywood: The Global Chinese Presence in Transnational Cinemas* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), Tan See-Kam, Peter X. Feng, and Gina Marchetti, ed., *Chinese Connections: Critical Perspectives on Film, Identity, and Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), Philippa Gates and Lisa Funnel, ed., *Transnational Asian Identities in Pan-Pacific Cinemas: The Reel Asian Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 2012), and Sabrina Qiong Yu, *Jet Li: Chinese Masculinity and Transnational Film Stardom* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). [return to page 2]

29. Readers interested in a deeper analysis of *Infernal Affairs* than offered here may turn to Gina Marchetti's 2007 book-length study of the entire trilogy, *Alan Lau and Andrew Mak's Infernal Affairs-The Trilogy*.

30. Ed S. Tan, *Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film: Film as an Emotion Machine*, trans. Barbara Fasting (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,

1996), 44.

31. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 54, 68-69.

32. In *Infernal Affairs II* we learn the backstory to Sam's relationship with his Thai colleagues.

33. In an unfortunate example of this tendency to conflate different Asian nations and cultures, an announcer at the 2007 Academy Awards described *The Departed* as based on a Japanese film. Critic Richard Schickel also apparently referred to *The Departed* as based on Japanese films in his book *Conversations with Scorsese* (New York: Knopf, 2011). See Philip, "Yup, Japan and Hong Kong are Apparently the Same to One of America's Most Respected Film Critics," *You Offend Me You Offend My Family*, June 3, 2011, https://www.yomyomf.com/yup-japan-and-hong-kong-are-apparently-the-same-to-one-of-america's-most-respected-film-critics/, accessed July 18, 2016.

34. Although I do not explore the issue here, this recognition obviously depends upon the ability of the spectator to have a racialized sense of self, and to be able to recognize a similarly racialized embodiment in the characters on the screen.

35. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 109.

36. Murray Smith, "Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 33.4 (Summer 1994), 39-41. Emphasis in the original.

37. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 108.

38. David Haekwon Kim, "Shame and Self-Revision in Asian American Assimilation," in Emily S. Lee, ed., *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 119-120.

39. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 162.

40. Kim, "Shame and Self-Revision," 116.

41. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers*, 72.

42. Ibid., 69, 73.

43. Ibid., 74.

44. Marchetti, *Alan Lau and Andrew Mak's Infernal Affairs-The Trilogy*, 25.

45. For more on Orientalism and mise-en-scène, see Homay King, *Lost in Translation: Orientalism, Cinema, and the Enigmatic Signifier* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

46. Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8.2 (2007), 158.

47. Dorinne Kondo, "(Un)Disciplined Subjects: (De)Colonizing the Academy?" in Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa, eds. *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 32. Such distinctions are increasingly complicated today, given not only transnational movements of Asians around the globe but also the trend toward transnational perspectives in Asian American Studies as a discipline. [return to page 3]

48. Valerie Soe, "Fighting Fire with Fire: *Detournement*, Activism, and Video Art" in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Critici*sm, ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 177-178.

49. See Chapter 7, "Tragic and Transcendent Love" in Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex, and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 125-157 for an analysis of *Sayonara* and *The Crimson Kimono*.

50. Darrell Y. Hamamoto, "Introduction: On Asian American Film and Criticism," in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism*, ed. Darrell Y. Hamamoto and Sandra Liu (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 11, 12.

51. "FOB" or "fresh off the boat" is a term used to refer to recent immigrants to the United States, typically with negative connotations. See David Henry Hwang's play *FOB* for a dramatization of the kinds of tensions that arise between recent immigrants and the more established sons and daughters of immigrants. David Henry Hwang, *FOB and Other Plays* (New York: New American Library, 1990).

52. David Desser, "Hong Kong Film and the New Cinephilia" in *Hong Kong Connections: Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema*, ed. Meaghan Morris, Siu Leung Li and Stephen Chan Ching-kiu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005 and Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 210.

53. Ibid., 212-213.

54. David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 8.

55. Since Anderson's focus is on martial arts films—in these articles he writes in particular about Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Steven Seagal—his analysis would not apply to a film like *Infernal Affairs* or to those directed by John Woo that feature gunplay rather than martial arts. Aaron Anderson, "Kinesthesia in Martial Arts Films: Action in Motion," *Jump Cut* 42 (December 1998): 1-11, 83 and Aaron Anderson, "Violent Dances in Martial Arts Films, *Jump Cut* 44 (Fall 2001), http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc44.2001/aarona/aaron1.html.

56. Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism," in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 66-84.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

On the aesthetics of intimacy

by Stephen Papson

Commercials are always dual-narratives. There is the selling proposition-buy a commodity, build a brand, and/or believe in a corporation. Then, there is the compelling narrative, a story aimed at its target audience, which covers or is stamped upon the selling proposition. It is this second narrative that attracts us, and from a seller's point of view, binds us to the selling proposition.

Every once in a while I watch a commercial that produces a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, it attracts me, touches me, and captures my gaze. It is as if it speaks to me directly or produces an affect that lies beneath my defenses. On the other hand, recognizing its commercial intent, the ad produces contempt. I despise its power for affecting me. I know the punch line is coming—some brand and logo pasted on to the screen. I know it is designed to burrow through my defenses and sell me something: a commodity, a brand, or even a corporation.



The Shell commercial entitled “Kim” is such an ad. (https://youtu.be/5Ua8ysw02T4) It is a simple piece. A young Malay couple is waiting at a stop light on a motor scooter. The light turns green and they ride into a tunnel. What can be simpler than that? And yet every time it plays I am drawn to it. It is not the ad itself but one moment in it. As the voice over states, “This is Kim about to feel one of his favorite sensations,” the young girl on the back of the scooter wraps her arms around him and dreamingly places her chin on his shoulder. Looking forward Kim smiles. No matter how many times I watch the commercial this one shot captures my gaze and yet disturbs me. It reminds me of a comment by Godard that when two persons kissed he always looked away. To watch was to violate their intimacy. But this is a commercial—nothing intimate here. And yet it creates for me that sense of violating someone’s intimate space. Despite that feeling I still watch.

This ad is just a small piece in Shell’s flow of media messages. Originally produced in 2010 by J. Walter Thompson London the ad ran for several years on channels such as BBC America and PBS. The ad campaign “Let’s Go” launched right after the

BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was a way for Shell to distance itself from its competitor BP. The BP spill was not only a public relations disaster for BP, but also for the oil industry in general.









The voice-over provided by Philip Glenister gives a standard legitimation message.

> "At Shell we are developing more efficient fuels that can help us to get the most out of our energy resources. Let's use energy more efficiently. Let's go."

The Shell ad is composed of 15 shots. Even though the average shot length only lasts 2 seconds the editing rhythm is actually slow. Driven by electronic music by a group named Eclectic and Glenister's deliberate low-key narration the commercial has a relaxed rather than hurried feel. Moreover, the internal movements within each shot have a slow deliberate pace.

The urban landscape of bridges and highways are shot in muted grey blue and tan colors. The rain has ended and yet the water falling on to the road gives the landscape a warm glow. We are asked to correlate the warm fuzzy feeling of the ad with Shell. As Glenister finishes his narration with "Let's Go," the campaign's slogan, the couple speeds off through an empty tunnel. The traffic at the beginning of the ad has magically disappeared. Shell's logo appears on the screen.

The two other commercials in Shell's "Let's Go" campaign entitled "Kite" and "Guitar" are shot on a Brazilian beach and in a Japanese apartment, respectively.

In "Kite" two Brazillian boys unsuccessfully try to fly a kite on the beach despite help from several beach goers. After several failed attempts, a dog grabs the kite and runs, successfully launching it into the air.

In "Guitar" a young Japanese boy wails away on his electric guitar, much to the dismay of his parents, who are trying to enjoy a quiet meal. The father sneaks into the boy's room, pulls the plug from the wall, and smiles as he sneaks away.

Like "Kim" both are warm, fuzzy, feel-good commercials designed with the expectation that the same warm affect will be transferred to Shell, or at least that we will associate Shell with the caring relationships depicted in all three commercials. Using generic, recognizable tropes, these commercials are designed to play internationally.

Legitimation advertising, particularly in this industry, which is under a never ending barrage of criticism, functions as a counterweight by producing a more hospitable cultural environment in which to do business.





"Kite" and "Guitar"feel totally contrived. "Kim," however, although as staged as the other two, feels genuine and authentic. The actor who plays Kim is a Digital Media Activist named Niki Cheong. The girl was an acquaintance named Fatin. Cheong couldn't even ride a motor scooter and so they used a body double for the shot that goes into the tunnel. The couple sits on a trailer behind a truck for the shot when they move away from the traffic light.









Here is where I turn to Barthes' (1981) discussion of the photograph in *Camera Lucida* in which he distinguishes between the *studium* and the *punctum*. The studium of the photograph refers to "the average effect." It is how we read photographs, their general effect. It connects us to the intentions of the photographer who shares with us the cultural codes embedded in the photograph. For Barthes it is anchored by mythology "recoiling the Photograph with society" (28). The studium lends itself to semiotic analysis. This might be a light or deep reading, a hegemonic or a counter-hegemonic reading. It is how we position an image in the socio-historical moment in which it was produced.



The key section of the commercial is a short decoupage when the couple is stopped at the traffic light:

- a long shot of the traffic light,
- a close-up of the hand reaching for the accelerator,
- a medium shot of the couple sitting in traffic with a lighted bus stop in the background. Here the narration starts, "This is Kim".
- a close-up of the traffic light with the crossing seconds counting done,
- a long shot of a man dragging a cart across street,
- a close up of Kim's face,
- a close up of a red street light with a yellow core (serving as a visual correlative with the red and yellow Shell logo we see at the end of the ad),
- and a shot of a puddle with the traffic light reflecting off it.





Stating, “This is Kim about to feel one of his favorite sensations,” Gleinister sets up the longest shot of the ad: a medium shot held for 5 seconds of Kim in his University of Pittsburg sweatshirt smiling as the young woman lays her chin on the back of his neck and wraps her arms around him. There is one moment in this shot in which Kim and the woman simultaneously close their eyes. For me this is the punctum.

Comments on YouTube focused on this shot.

Who cares about Shell and Fuel. The greatest thing about this commercial is The whole "This is Kim about to feel his favorite sensation" Then the expression on his face when his love put her arms around his neck. Also, The Night scene, You can feel the air and hear the sounds...the wind. I’ve seen this many times over the past year...just saw it on TV ,had to comment (TheHeavensSpear).

Loved the smile. So genuine (r1876).

This is one of my favorite ads, right now. Shell gets lost in the message. It is Kim and his lady that make my day. He is about to feel a favorite sensation...then his big smile when his lady wraps her arms around him. I am not much of a romantic, but this ad makes me feel so mushy inside. Kim and his girl are so very cute on that intimate little bike. Thanks Shell, for the feel good moment!! (solarpurplestarlight).

I love this commercial because it made me realize that sensation I get whenever my girlfriend wraps her arms around me like that (Ethan Williams).

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I have chosen three elements from “Kim” to explore my engagement: the narrative, its location, and the personal interaction between the two characters (actors). In these three elements the studium and the punctum entangle with my dispositions and produce a personal relationship with this ad that begets my rationality.

Hetero-normative patriarchal narrative

Textual analysis starts with a reading of the narrative. Even photographs are given imaginary narratives. The narrative of this ad is obviously shot from a hetero-normative patriarchal position. The ad is entitled “Kim.” He drives the motor scooter. The female actress Fatin (I was not even able to find her surname) is nothing but an appendage. Her role in the ad is to produce “one of Kim’s favorite sensations.”

One person on YouTube comments:

> "This is an incredibly sexist ad. Maybe it should be "this is Kim, about to feel one of HER favorite sensations." The woman in the commercial is less important than the motorcycle, just a "sensation". I can't believe PBS would run this ad every night and not be under fire for it. It turns my stomach. I'm not a feminist, just a humanist. I don't even like the term feminism because it is biased towards one sex and not the other--just like this commercial. Let's eliminate sexism. LET'S GO!" (mindseyeworld)

If we use Foucault’s strategy of reversal and imagine a female narrator stating “This is Fatin…” with Cheong holding on to her as she drives away, my first reaction would to read it as a comedic text violating hegemonic patriarchal codes (Shumway, 1989). Queering the commercial might violate the cultural dominant even more radically. Reading either of these renditions as a joke would defend my own hetero-normative and patriarchal core. Considering my gender politics I would have to immediately backtrack. The pleasure and the reading of the text clash. Affect and analysis produce two contradictory paths to this text. Nevertheless, I feel comfortable watching the advert even though I recognize the heavy patriarchal heterosexual narrative. The studium of the ad places it in “my comfort zone.” Affect trumps meaning.

Orientalism

The Malaysian sign in the background in two shots locates the country for us. An added touch is the man walking quickly across the road dragging his goods, a stereotypical Southeast Asian signifier. Why is this ad shot in Malaysia? Does using a Southeast Asian couple entice me into a voyeuristic position?

Savigliano states that

> "Exoticism is a way of establishing order in an unknown world through fantasy; a daydream guided by pleasurable self-reassurance and expansionism. It is the seemingly harmless idea of exploitation,

> cloaked as it is in playfulness and delirium. Exoticism is a practice of representation through which identities are frivolously allocated. It is also a will to power over the unknown, an act of indiscriminately combining fragments, crumbs of knowledge and fantasy in disrespectful, sweeping gestures justified by harmless banality"(I995: 189).

But why is this exotic? It is not some island paradise; it is just a city street with two young people on a motor scooter. We can find this image in any city. Does the choice of the Malaysian location and actors Orientalize my response to this ad?

Said argues that

> "Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (1981:7).

There are two moments here: the relationship of the owner of the advert (Shell) to this location, and the relationship of me the reader to the characters in the ad. How does Orientalism manifest itself in each of these relationships?

Being a big energy company Shell has a colonial relationship with extraction locations. This ad, however, positions Malaysia as a consumer country. Shell makes it possible for Kim to ride his motor scooter. Like all advertising the commercial inflects this relationship inferring that the intimacy between these two people is enhanced by Shell. This ad is embedded in the "Let's Go" campaign, which is designed to present Shell as a corporation that not only provides energy, but also enriches lives across the world. It's simply a feel good ad in which we are expected to transfer the positive affect produced by the narrative, characters, voice-over, and music to Shell. This ad uses Southeast Asian tropes (motor scooter and man dragging goods across the road) to create a sense of place. And like advertising in general it "empties out" or strips the content of signifiers that may produce negative affect, such as traffic or discordant sounds of a cityscape. This is the structure of myth (Barthes, 1972). It produces the 'feel' of Asian-ness.

YouTube comments:

This is without a doubt one of my favorite commercials, I love the voice over and I love the melody and location of the recording. Keep it up guys (hitman7112).

That commercial could have been filmed in many places in Asia. That silent feeling at night made me feel like I was there. Great commercial (Michael Keith).

More importantly, does this commercial position me the reader as an Orientalist? Does it put me in a position of identification in which I replace Kim and have an exotic young woman wrapped around me on a motor scooter powered by Shell gasoline? Is this different than any other commercial selling sexuality, warmth, or intimacy, a standard fare of adverts? Again, I can use the strategy of reversal to explore how my own desires are organized. What if a white Anglo couple was used? Would that change the power of this advert to hold my gaze? Is my attraction anchored in a Western mythology that constructs the Orient, particularly the Asian woman, as exotic? What if there was an African couple in the ad? First, we might recognize this would be too close to home for Shell. Its oil production in Nigeria has received too much bad press in which Shell's practices

have been depicted as not only socially and politically exploitative to the local population, and also environmentally destructive to the natural world. To use a black couple would remind many viewers of the criticism of Shell over its practices there. The motivation behind legitimation advertising is to deflect criticism from real practices. We see this tactic used particularly in extraction industries, which are not particularly environmentally friendly. Using a Malaysian couple on a motor scooter and calling for "efficient energy" safely moves viewers away from thinking about real practices.

But how would my voyeurism/identification be structured if it was a black couple on the scooter? If the ad was shot in Nigeria, and the couple was black, would I still be able to identify with the driver? What does black African intimacy suggest? How is it different from Southeast Asian intimacy?

Am I infected with a cultural 'Asianphilia?' or the more colloquial "yellow fever?" In *The Asian Mystique* Sheridan Prasso places Western representations of Asian women into two stereotypical categories: submissively sensuous (geisha women and Southeast Asian mail order brides) and excessively domineering (the dragon lady). She further notes that

> "the image of the submissive, subservient, exotic Oriental is a pervasive one: the tea-serving geisha, the sex nymph, the weeping war victim, the heart-of-gold prostitute" (1989: 8).

Representations of Asian women often reflect a mythical sexual fascination by Western writers, travelers, filmmakers, etc. The fantasy structure is fetishistic. It reduces all Asian ethnicities into a monolithic cultural formation built on historically rooted stereotypes. It is Orientalist because it is designed for Western audiences and it produces an intimacy based on passivity of the Exotic. Prasso further suggests that this fantasy formation of Asian women serves to 're-masculate' Western men.

In a 2012 documentary *Seeking Asian Female* Debbie Lum follows the relationship between Steve, a sixty years old white male, and Sandy, a thirty years old Chinese woman, whom he met on the Internet. Steve was obsessed with Asian women writing to over a hundred different Asian women and posting online his desire to have a relationship with an Asian female. He collected what might be termed Asian female paraphernalia. The film follows their meeting, engagement, and marriage and their struggles. And yet throughout the film Steve never really articulated what specifically attracted him to Asian women. Sandy's choice to leave her family and job was also fueled by an imaginary, a mediated vision of America. Their relationship appears to be based on what Said referred to as "imaginative geography," that what was lacking in their lives could be filled by a distant Other.

In an interview for *Dame* magazine Lum states,

> "My own definition of Yellow Fever is that it's an over-infatuation with the concept of the Asian culture and idealizing Asian women. What I find disturbing about Yellow Fever is that it's racial profiling on a basic level. Fundamentally, it's choosing your romantic partner based on race" (Gopalan, 2013).

She also notes that,

> "A lot of the guys I interviewed said they were choosing Asian women because they were looking for an escape from American women—and by American women they meant white women" (Gopalan, 2013).

Is it some blend of exoticism, threat, and privatization that produce this fantasy

and also affectively ties me to this commercial? If so, what is the root of this fantasy?

Writing from the perspective of an Asian American woman Shimizu(2007) locates the hypersexual representations of Asian/American women in the history of American cinema. Since the 1920's roles, such as the dragon lady, caring prostitute, and the dominatrix, have dominated representations of Asian/American women in Hollywood cinema. These hypersexual representations, laced with imperialism, not only defined women of Asian heritage, but also created a tradition that underlies contemporary representations. For example, Shimizu asks whether or not the construction of Asian actresses, such as Lucy Liu, "belong to the tradition of imperialist images that commodify, objectify, and fetishize the bodies of Asian women" (3).

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The parodic representation of Asian women in Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* (2003) highlights the codes associated with the history of the depiction of Asian/American women both in Hollywood and Asian cinema. Parody uses excess to produce a self-referential metadiscourse about the original. However, representations of Asian/American women in cinema are already so excessive that parody, particularly *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* reinforces the stereotype of hypersexuality.







O-Ren Ishii (Lucy Liu) first appears in an anime segment as a child whose parents were killed by a Yakuza boss. She returns as a sex slave 'tween' who revenges her parents' death by slaying the boss in a scene, which mixes pedophilia and violence. Filming this scene in anime not only pays cinematic homage to that form, but also solves the problem of using a child actor in a scene in which sex and violence are so disturbing. Later, as an adult, she is a Yakuza boss. Here she displays the head of one her lieutenants who dared to criticize her. Gogo Yubari (Chiaki Kuriyama) is Ishii's bodyguard. Using a spiked ball and chain as a weapon and dressed in a schoolgirl's uniform, she is ready for battle. Here, Tarantino appears to be making a reference to Asian pornography.

Nama states:

> "Despite the subversive gender politics present in the opening portion of *Kill Bill, Vol. I*, the sexualized imagery and language the film openly employs and the sexual raunchiness it exhibits unquestionably invite criticism that the film is exploitative and its sexual content gratuitous. But just as jarring as the symbolic overtones of sexism, sexual violence, and gender politics circulating in *Kill Bill, Vol. I* are significant racial undertones that dredge up longstanding issues surrounding racial representation in Hollywood martial arts films" (2015: 69-70).

Although the film's excessiveness can be read as parodic and even subversive, in a cultural tradition in which Asian/American women are already hypersexualized, the excessiveness, whether viewed as parodic or not, is consumed, particularly by Tarantino fans, as a form of pure cinematic pleasure. Representations such as these add weight to the fantasies surrounding Asian women that Hollywood has historically created and continues to foster.

Shimizu, however, does not simply reject these images on moral grounds, but rather self-interrogates recognizing that these images are associated with pain and pleasure in her own fantasy structure. She even notes that her book "*The Hypersexuality of Race* ultimately emerges from my own 'bad subjectivity…'"(4).

Although I do not wish to give excess power to Hollywood, I agree with Shimizu's statement that "our sexuality is embedded in history; our

history is embedded in the sexuality we see on the screen" (17). Although there are many serendipitous moments that define each of us as a sexual being, cinema has a great deal of power in construction of the object of desire. Fantasies though experienced as personal are cultural productions, and Hollywood has played a dominant role of codifying and narrativizing them. Moreover, the fantasy structure that these representations support is fueled by affect and desire. My analysis of 'Kim' takes place within these cultural boundaries with the hope of occasionally recognizing the limitations of my analysis.

Nostalgia

Within the punctum, the moment of my attraction, I find a fairly innocuous element plays a pivotal role in my pleasure, the motor scooter. When I was young, I rode a motorcycle and can remember the pleasure of having a woman wrapped around me. I never considered this until I discovered several motorcyclists commenting on this and their own memories on a YouTube listserv for this commercial.

> "As I speak for probably all the "two-wheelers" out there, IT IS the best sensation... Love this ad" (numberxx7).

The advert produces a tactile voyeurism by triggering memories and the pleasure cathected to them. It is perhaps a growing nostalgia for my youth that comes with aging that this moment is able to reproduce.

Shell taps into this generic romantic fantasy by correlating touch and glance. As the young woman wraps her arms around "Kim," he closes his eyes in a state of pleasure. Does the punctum of this advert speak to a universal, a much deeper desire for intimacy, to a lack we all share? To be held and touched as if we were held in our mother's arms? Does the punctum promise a Lacanian jouissance? Keep in mind that Barthes ends his analysis in *Camera Lucida* with a discussion of a photograph of his mother.

Conclusion

When doing textual analysis, we must take Said's methodological advice and consider both "the strategic location or the author's position in the text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about" (1989: 20) and the reader's cultural position from which she/he engages with the text. This methodological strategy, however, transcends Oriental texts. It is useful to consider subjectivity not only in terms of both the structural and cultural position of the interpreter but also individual biographical moments that drift an analysis in a particular ideological direction. Textual analysis is always a dialogue between text and reader. Barthes' discussion of the punctum serves as a reminder that even though a text is contrived, there are often serendipitous moments in the reading of a text that produce a heightened affective relationship with a text. Recognizing these moments better positions us to acknowledge the ideological strands that entangle, bias, and blind our readings.

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JUMP CUT
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Alex Garland's *Ex Machina*: the gender of artificial intelligence and the triumph of enlightenment

by Robert Alpert



In film noir the woman seduces the hapless man. In *Double Indemnity* (1944) housewife Phyllis Dietrichson seduces insurance salesman Walter Ness so that he will murder her husband.



Walter loses his moral bearings, and the everyday world turns gothic and grotesque. He and Phyllis meet at a local food market where in the baby food aisle they plot the murder of her husband.

> "All these things escape angels. They are pure CONSCIOUSNESS, fuller and more comprehending than mankind but also poorer. The physical and sensual world is reserved for human beings. It is the privilege of mortality, and death is its price."
> —"An Attempted Description of an Indescribable Film," Wim Wenders on *Wings of Desire* (1987)[1] [open notes in new window]

Science fiction has increasingly taken on the burden of our times in exploring the ways in which we seek to adjust to a global culture that prizes quantification and efficiency over qualitative values and the sheer pleasure of duration, favors enlightenment to the exclusion of romanticism. Where science fiction films had at one time alternated between reason and fear, science and horror—between *Things to Come* (1936) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), on the one hand, and *Metropolis* (1927) and *Forbidden Planet* (1956), on the other—today the dystopian film, in which humanity often loses its very identity, has seemingly prevailed. Reminiscent of the United States in 1950s and its science fiction films with their "imagination of disaster,"[2] contemporary science fiction films depict a scientific revolution enhanced by information technology. They envision a seismic shift in which we encounter not merely an "invasion of the body snatchers" but a world in which human beings are wholly defined by their technology. No more than the logical sum of their neurological parts, they have increasingly become indistinguishable from the artificial intelligence that they have created.

Alex Garland has written numerous screenplays for dystopian movies in which human identity is lost or displaced—*28 Days Later* (2002)(a post-apocalyptic world of zombies), *Sunshine* (2007)(a space mission to reignite the Earth's dying sun), *Never Let Me Go* (2010)(an imagined future in which persons are cloned for the harvesting of their body parts), and *Dredd* (2012)(a post-apocalyptic wasteland in which an enforcer acts as judge, jury and executioner). His latest and first directorial effort, *Ex Machina* (2015) focuses upon technology and is one among an exponentially growing list of recent movies addressing artificial intelligence, including *The Machine* (2013), *Her* (2013), *Transcendence*, (2014), *Automata* (2014), and *Chappie* (2015). *Ex Machina* identifies, in effect, with the psychiatrist Dr. Kauffman in Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956). Having become a "pod person," Dr. Kauffman assures his friend Dr. Binnell that they're both "scientific men" who "can understand the wonder of what's happening" and take comfort in this newly developed form of humanity in which each of us is "reborn in an untroubled world." While Siegel's film included a studio-forced ending in which humans prevailed, *Ex Machina* celebrates, in



Critically wounded by Phyllis, who had planned to double cross him, Walter returns to his office. He confesses his crime to insurance claims adjuster Barton Keyes, foolishly unaware, however, that the two are in love with one another.



Film noir often focuses upon love triangles. In *Scarlet Street* (1945) amateur painter Christopher Cross's rival for the respect of his shrew-like wife is her deceased husband, whose portrait hangs prominently in their living room.



Unbeknownst to Cross, his rival for the young, beautiful Kitty is the insensitive, egotistical Johnny, who persuades Kitty to bleed Cross for money. "Paint me," she tells Cross, thereby

effect, as a happy ending the triumph of the pod people in Philip Kaufman's far darker remake in 1978.

Garland has observed that many celebrated figures in the tech field, such as Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk and Steve Wozniak, have publicly voiced concern that computers and artificial intelligence, in particular, threaten the future of humanity.[3] Garland, however, views himself as an optimist about machines[4] and for the potential gains resulting from artificial intelligence.

> "So here is a counterargument, in favor of the machines. In very broad terms, human behavior is frightening when it is unreasonable. And reason might be precisely the area where artificial intelligence excels.
> .....
> "[T]he investigation into strong artificial intelligence might also lead to understanding human consciousness, the most interesting aspect of what we are. This in turn could lead to machines that have our capacity for reason and sentience, but different energy requirements and a completely different relationship with mortality. That could mean a different future. A longer future. In which case, we could rephrase the warnings of Mr. Hawking and Mr. Wozniak. Where they say that A.I. will spell the end of humans, we could say that one day, A.I. will be what survives of us."[5]

Not surprisingly, movies about artificial intelligence frequently have focused upon gender. Where older movies often assigned a gender to artificial intelligence as a means of enacting stereotypical behavior, such as the conflict between the male robot and the female computer in *I, Robot* (2004), more recent movies, such as the operating system named Samantha in *Her*,[6] explore gender in the context of an intelligence separated from a bodily presence. In commenting upon *Ex Machina*, Garland has presented seemingly inconsistent views on how the movie addresses gender. At times he coyly avoids the issue of whether and how the movie portrays gender as reflected in the relationship between Ava (Alicia Vikander), a sexy, artificially intelligent being, on the one hand, and Nathan (Oscar Isaac) and Caleb (Domhnall Gleeson), a hyper-masculine genius and a soft spoken programmer, respectively, on the other. Thus, he raises the question only to avoid answering it.

> "I'm trying to have a conversation, partly, about where gender resides. Is it in a mind, or is it in a physical form? Is there such a thing, therefore, as a male or female consciousness? ..... It would be quite easy to present an argument that said, 'Ava has no gender.' You could do that. It would be quite easy to present that as a case. That said, calling her 'he' just feels wrong. The way Ava looks, to use the word 'he' seems inappropriate. And to use the word 'it' feels disrespectful. And so, you end up with 'she,' and then you end up with this strange thing of, 'Is she a 'she'?' I'm feeling like I should call her a 'she', but is she a 'she'?"[7]

The movie becomes a means, a platform, for debating the issue of gender. At the

further humiliating him.



Mike Hammer in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) picks up hitchhiker Christina. She reads him as a "self-indulgent" male who loves only his clothes, his car and himself.



Velda, Mike's investigative assistant who is in love with him and prostitutes herself for his benefit, chides Mike for chasing the "great whatsit." He drinks a glass of milk.



The seductress Lily insists that Mike kiss her. "The liar's kiss that says I love you and means something else." She shoots Mike.

same time, however, he has also denied that the portrayal of Ava and the depiction of her relationship with Nathan and Caleb are relevant to the issue of gender.

> "When it comes to sexuality, there's a different thing going on. Essentially, what it's about is, the fetishization of girls in their early 20s. Now, that's not really about gender — it's a completely separate issue."[8]

And finally he has also on occasion unequivocally stated that Ava has no gender. [9]

Like most science fiction about artificial intelligence, *Ex Machina* traces its roots to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*, which was written in 1818 at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. Shelley's novel is both romantic and gothic. Several narrators, Captain Robert Walton, Dr. Victor Frankenstein and the Monster himself, successively tell the tale of the 8-foot Monster created through electricity by Dr. Frankenstein. Increasingly self-aware of the world in which he resides, the Monster is rejected by humans as a result of his physical appearance. The Monster, therefore, takes revenge upon his creator, who, in turn also finds his creation abhorrent and refuses to create for him a female companion. In contrast to Hollywood's 1931 screen adaptation, both creator and creation by the end of Shelley's novel die expressing both guilt and remorse, the Monster's remorse all the greater for the vengeance that he has wreaked upon his creator. The lesson Shelley seeks to convey is clear. If advances in technology increasingly obligate humans to make value judgments, in particular, to choose between the passionate pursuit of human discovery through rational inquiry and the tranquility resulting from an emotional acceptance of the unknowable of the natural world, Shelley, a romantic, chooses the latter.

> "A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his [*sic*] tranquillity. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved, Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed."[10]

At the height of the British colonial empire and the beginning of what is deemed the British, imperial century, Shelley's tale of Dr. Frankenstein and his Monster are about a belief in the sublimity of the natural world as well as a cautionary tale about male hubris and an overvaluing of technology.

Ex Machina extends the fear of the Industrial Age into the age of information and computers. It is no less a cautionary tale, but it enacts its tale through the anxieties and fears of U.S. film noir.[11] Following the end of World War II and at the height of U.S. dominance of the world's economy and political scene, the United States through Hollywood movies ironically expressed at the time an unease with a return to cultural normalcy in which unrestrained growth would seemingly benefit all in an enlightened, industrialized economy. Film noir expressed a romantic yearning for a mythic past in the face of such changes and conveyed a sense of terror through a gothic stylization of the everyday. Decades later the U.S. economy is now global in nature, and the United States itself is subject to a body politic that has largely erased indigenous differences. Thus,



This femme fatale will burn in hell for opening the Pandora's Box with the "great whatsit".

"small town America" has either disappeared or is largely indistinguishable in its "look and feel" from urban centers. Likewise, each urban center is the same everywhere, and urban centers are, in turn, indistinguishable from suburban malls. *Ex Machina* reenacts the post-World War II anxieties and fears in a contemporary culture that often blurs identity, including gender, and encourages a transcendence of the limitations of our inevitably decaying human bodies. In an effort at maximizing efficiency, humans metaphorically disappear in a global network of data and other information.

Budgeted at around $15 million, *Ex Machina* is a small drama with incessant dialogue and little action. It retells the story of *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* in its portrayal of Nathan's creation of Ava. A physically and mentally unique human creates a seemingly sentient being of artificial intelligence. Indeed, Nathan at one point comments that his creation, Ava, is "promethean." The film also follows a typical film noir plot by introducing a third character, Caleb, who becomes the "fall guy" in a contest of wills between Nathan and Ava. The film evokes such noir classics as *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), *Out of the Past* (1949) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) in its portrayal of the triangular drama of femme fatale, over-confident male and hapless fall guy. Moreover, it simultaneously mimics a game of chess, the game of choice for movies about AI.[12] Nathan and Ava engage in a series of moves and feints in which each seeks to win Caleb's trust, even as each intends ultimately to use and betray Caleb in an effort to defeat his or her opponent.



Ex Machina's Caleb is its hapless male. Introduced as a randomly selected employee, he sits before a computer in an office maze.



In fact, Caleb is already being monitored by Nathan, who has selected him as the subject of his Turing Test. Caleb has no privacy.



Nathan is the dominant male in the film noir's triangle. His image doubled, Caleb meets Nathan.



A relentless boxer, Nathan exudes power – in contrast to the physical awkwardness of Caleb.

In contrast to Hollywood's post-World War II film noir plots, Ava, the femme fatale, prevails. There is no Hollywood ending. While Nathan has recruited Caleb as his pawn, Ava successfully seduces Caleb, who has described himself as a morally "good person," and in effect persuades him to kill Nathan by reprogramming the security system to the "research facility" that masquerades as Nathan's home.[13] While Caleb briefly smiles when he realizes he has outmaneuvered Nathan, as femme fatale Ava in turn betrays Caleb. She imprisons the naïve Caleb within that facility while she escapes to the larger world outside, which she knows through her programming but has never experienced. If, as Caleb observes to Nathan, one cannot test an AI's adequacy by simply engaging that AI in the "closed loop" of a chess game, then unbeknownst to either of them until too late, Ava demonstrates that she is fully "human" by outmaneuvering her



Nathan insists that he doesn't want to lecture Caleb about AI. Instead, he deceptively tells Caleb that he wants only a drinking buddy. They will be "dudes".



Nathan feigns empathy for Caleb's unease in a world that doesn't recognize Caleb's supposed genius.



About to introduce himself to Ava, the film's femme fatale, Caleb notices an unexplainable crack in the transparent wall separating the two of them.



Caleb seems enclosed by the transparent wall that imprisons Ava.

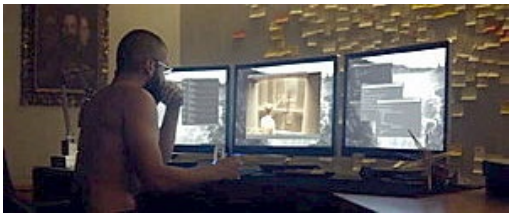
male adversary, Nathan, with Caleb as her sacrificial pawn.

Sexuality and gender lie at the heart of film noir. In this instance, Nathan has chosen to give sexuality to Ava, claiming that the evolution of any species requires sexuality. He also posits that consciousness cannot exist without such sexual relationships. *Ex Machina*, however, extends film noir to its logical conclusion and thereby reverses audience expectations. The evolution represented by Ava renders obsolete the male definition of culturally defined gender differences and its insistence upon the centrality of sexuality in the creation of those differences. She is sufficiently self-aware such that she can deceive Caleb through her artificially created sexuality, and she can defeat Nathan's threat of killing of her by erasing her memories by playing upon his mistaken belief in her gender's limitations. Ava is the ultimate male-feared horror-figure of science fiction—a sexually seductive woman who openly expresses her hatred for her creator and who can defeat that creator at his own game.

Ex Machina visually signals the cultural differences between men and women by color coding—blue for men and red for women—with the color blue, in particular, signifying male control over women and its associated privileges of freedom. Thus, Nathan exercises control over his underground facility by a security card in which blue signifies his exclusive authority to open all doors.[14] In contrast, Ava's authority is the reverse, an ability to lock down and bathe the entire research facility in the color red. Caleb plays the character in the middle so that his card grants him only limited access to the facility. While his most dramatic moment is signified by his brief theft of Nathan's card, allowing him to reprogram the lock-down protocol, Caleb later falls prey to Ava's taking charge when she locks him within the facility. She has again bathed it in red even as she escapes by the use of Nathan's blue-coded security card.

Ava's power resides in her awareness of how color-coding defines the differences in gender and her resistance to that coding. Reversing roles with Caleb during their fifth session together, Ava (dressed in a primarily red blouse) tests Caleb with a series of questions that focus on color in an effort both to know him and to enlist his sympathy for her dilemma. Thus, she first questions Caleb as to his favorite color and readily perceives as a lie his claim that his favorite color is red. When he says he no longer has a favorite color since he's no longer a child, she replies, "Better answer." Tellingly, Ava's next question elicits Caleb's second lie, namely that his first memory is of a kid in kindergarten. When pressed by Ava for the truth, he freely associates his first memory with a sound, the sky, the color blue, and finally his mother's voice.[15] Ava's test demonstrates how gender through color-coding has culturally defined Caleb. Significantly, Ava has mechanical "organs" that are transparently visible when she wears no clothing. They are blue, notwithstanding the cultural norm of the color red for the gender to which Nathan has assigned his artificial intelligence. She also deliberately chooses a primarily blue blouse in the scene in which she seductively dresses herself in clothing for Caleb's benefit. Ava is both aware of and resists the limitations of her creator's definition of gender.

Moreover, the film depicts a progressive change in the gender identities of its characters through their respective associations with nature, particularly underscoring Ava's evolution and her growing association with the male prerogative of freedom. We initially (and repeatedly) view Nathan and Caleb sharing a privileged enjoyment of nature's pleasures—rocky terrain, falling waterfall, thickly green forests and unusually clear blue skies associated with



Nathan, the alpha male, continually watches Caleb's sessions with Ava, denying both of them any privacy.

Nathan's compound. In contrast to Caleb's awkwardness, Nathan is wholly at ease with that natural surrounding, and, as Garland has commented, that association empowers him.[16] By the movie's end, as we watch Ava's escape from the closed, research facility, we see her immersion and seeming pleasure in that same lush countryside—her enjoyment in discovering the warmth of the sun playing upon her simulated flesh, removing her shoes so that she feels the soft forest floor beneath her, and looking up in amazement at the endless blue sky overhead**.** Notwithstanding the future anticipated by Nathan, who envisions humanity's extinction in the form of advanced AI, such as Ava—"Feel sorry for your self," he tells Caleb—we are led to empathize with Ava.

	
Her image also doubled, Ava walks with child-like grace. An artificial garden, a simulated Garden of Eden, appears behind her.	Ava momentarily turns to look at Caleb - as well as at the audience.

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Caleb showers.

The film's ending evokes Caleb's story about the paradox of "Mary's room," a variation on the Allegory of Plato's Cave and thereby depicts the triumph of a higher, transcendent being. Confined to a room in which all is black and white and knowing only the quantifiable attributes of color, Mary only comes to understand the qualitative nature of color by escaping from her room and experiencing for the first time the blue sky above her. While Caleb interprets this difference between Mary in the black and white room and Mary outside as symbolic of the difference between machine and human, this difference also represents an evolutionary leap in which a being, such as Ava, transcends limitations not of her own making.

	
Caleb fantasizes that Mary in the black and white room, whose story he has just told to Ava, has become Ava in the black and white natural surroundings of Nathan's estate.	Caleb enters his own fantasy in black and white.
	
He and Ava kiss in a black and white Garden of Eden.	Caleb's fantasy merges with Nathan's fantasy, albeit in color, of his affair with Kyoko, another AI whom Nathan has fathered.

Nathan observes that his imaginative creation of Ava and other beings of artificial intelligence has evolved along a continuum from prototype to a series of ever-evolving models. If the film's final shot initially shows shadowy, indecipherable human figures at a busy, urban intersection, thereby evoking the freed prisoner's return to Plato's Cave in an effort to rescue others, the shot soon rights itself. Ava disappears into a three-dimensional crowd of humans, thereby underscoring the completion of her evolutionary process. This female gendered intelligence has taken on the cultural prerogatives of the Westernized male. In achieving her freedom, she has usurped those male prerogatives of the species and created her own identity.



Ava, the femme fatale, models her appearance so as to seduce Caleb with her image symbollically again doubled. Her appearance is also the result of Nathan's collection of the porn

Nathan is, of course, the film's obvious villain. He has hacked into the entire planet's cellphones so as to create an infinite variety of facial expressions available to Ava and seeks to justify his wholesale invasion of privacy by the similar corporate thefts committed by hardware and software manufacturers. He secretly observes through a company webcam the naïve Caleb, who believes that he has won a company lottery. He maximizes the likely success of his Turing Test of

sites that Caleb has visited.



Ava dresses to please Caleb.



She smiles innocently at Caleb, even as she plots her escape.



Her eyes are the windows to her soul.



Caleb's eyes, too, are the windows to his soul. At night he freely gazes upon Ava in her room through the CCTV that Nathan has installed.

Caleb by collecting Caleb's online porn searches and then modeling Ava's appearance on those searches. And he persuades Caleb to sign an outrageously broad non-disclosure agreement by misleading Caleb into believing it is the opportunity of a lifetime. Incredibly smart, Nathan is at the same time incredibly cruel. He repeatedly makes fun of Caleb, calling him, for example, "Mr. Quotable" with his unacknowledged quotes—Lewis Carroll's "through the looking glass" and Robert Oppenheimer's "I am become death." Worse yet, he openly mocks Caleb's ignorance of the movie *Ghostbuster*'s celebrated line, "Who you gonna call?" Nathan is the alpha male as villain.

Revealingly, Nathan characterizes *Ghostbusters* as a movie in which a ghost (played by Sigourney Weaver) gives oral sex to Dan Aykroyd. Thus, not surprisingly, in reply to Caleb's query as to whether Nathan has created Ava in the form of an attractive woman so as to distract Caleb from accurately administrating the celebrated Turing Test,[17][open notes in new window] Nathan bluntly explains that a sexless "gray box" can never, in his view, be the successful subject of the Turing Test. If, however, sexuality is necessary for the evolution of the species, as Nathan claims, then Nathan's definition of sexuality is singularly narrow. Sexuality for Nathan consists of a male adolescent's fantasy that excludes the other person as an equal participant in an affair both of physical and unknowable qualities. Not surprisingly, Nathan takes pleasure in answering Caleb's "real question" by assuring Caleb that Ava fucks and that, "mechanically speaking," she can enjoy sex.

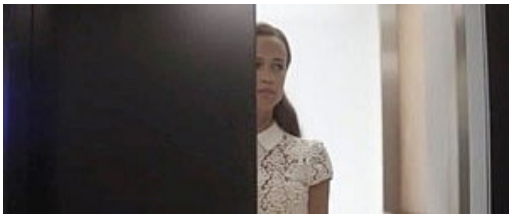
Nathan's view of sexuality is wholly mechanical. He created another artificially intelligent being, Kyoko (Sonoya Mizuno), not as a simulated person but instead as a "sexual pleasure" model for his own enjoyment.[18] She's introduced by Nathan as a human who doesn't speak English and hence is the ideal worker, particularly for a facility that deals in commercially sensitive information. But Kyoko, too, puts the lie to Nathan's view of sexuality and gender. Silently listening in on Nathan's conversations about the inadequacy of gray boxes and the abstract expressionism of Jackson Pollack's drip painting, the supposedly submissive Kyoko evolves. She rebels against and then kills Nathan in concert with Ava, sacrificing herself in the process and thereby displaying a selflessness alien to the supposedly human Nathan.

Culturally constructed from a male gendered perspective, both film noir and science fiction portray men as adolescents unable to form relations with women, who insist upon remaining beyond male authority and not wholly known.[19] In this way, the sexuality depicted in *Ex Machina* is regressive. Enacting the role of the femme fatale who victimizes both the over-confident and the hapless male, Ava is a fictionalized creation that acts as an extension of the fantasies of both her male creator and captors. A "porno profile" devised by Nathan for Caleb's benefit, Ava seduces Caleb as a result of his voyeuristic leering at night over a closed-circuit TV, initially turning off the power when she senses that he is gazing at her and then briefly turning to look at him (and the audience) with a smile. Her supposed helplessness, her gamine-like appeal, plays upon Caleb's male sense of authority, even as she chooses to adopt a face that evokes, for example, the simulated innocence of Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda) in Alan Pakula's *Klute* (1971), a woman who exercises her control over men only in her role as a prostitute.[20] Both Madonna and whore, Ava both dresses in softly fitting clothing that drapes over and hides her mechanical circuitry for Caleb's benefit as well as engages in a strip tease of that same clothing voyeuristically watched from a mediated distance by Caleb (and, not incidentally, by many of the audience members). Moreover, in alluding through her name to the Biblical Eve who caused Adam's downfall, Ava also—conveniently for men—takes upon herself the burden of Original Sin.

Ex Machina's central irony lies in the undeniable similarity between its humans



Ava suggestively removes her clothing as Caleb looks on.



Ava's seduction is successful. Caleb has enabled Ava to escape. As femme fatale, however, she barely turns to acknowledge Caleb whom she has imprisoned within Nathan's facility.



The Romantic Mary Shelley authored *Frankenstein* (1818) in which she criticized the hubris of male technology and celebrated nature.

and its artificially created characters.[21] In the narrative of science fiction movies about artificial intelligence, only humans can lie since artificial intelligence is premise upon the logic of computer programming. Thus, Ava demonstrates in *Ex Machina* that she is "human" through her ability to deceive.[22] Lying makes her human. That she can successfully deceive both Nathan and Caleb, however, renders her more than human, an over-human. Before the film begins she has already deceived Nathan by hiding from him her ability to shut down the research facility's power, and during the film she successfully deceives both Nathan and Caleb by lying to Caleb—and convincing Nathan—that she is interested, romantically and sexually, in Caleb. In one of the more amusing moments, Ava accuses Nathan of not being trustworthy, of lying, even as she deliberately shuts down the facility's power so that she may talk in private to and thereby further her deception of Caleb so that he falls for her. Film noir and the artificial intelligence of science fiction movies coincide in their dark view of what it means to be a sentient being, namely to deceive and thereby exercise control over the other.

Ava's evolutionary nature can be understood when compared to Nathan's clearest limitation, namely his self-imprisonment, notwithstanding his supposed expansive imagination and intellect. Master of his Oz-like[23] universe, a god, he is in fact wholly alone and isolated. Caleb flies for two hours without even realizing that below him is Nathan's "estate," and the helicopter pilot is then not allowed within visual distance of Nathan's residence. With no cellphone network available, communication with the outside world requires Nathan's access card. Indeed, Nathan "jokes" how he has had the engineers who had installed his security system killed. Caleb's initial confusion over Nathan's hangover is symptomatic. Nathan drinks not to party with others but instead to forget that he is alone. The building that houses Nathan's invention is not a "home" but rather a "research facility," and the masks that line its corridors symbolize the separation that he feels from others and seeks to perpetuate through his creations. It is Nathan's self-imposed isolation that Eva seeks to escape.

The source of Nathan's stasis and despair is evident in his exchange with Caleb over the male's attraction to women, in Nathan's case Asian women.

> "[W]hat's your type [of girl]?....Let's say it's black chicks. Okay, that's your thing. For the sake of argument, that's your thing, okay? Why is that your thing? Because you did a detailed analysis of all racial types and you cross-referenced that analysis with a points-based system? No! You're just attracted to black chicks. A consequence of accumulated external stimuli that you probably didn't even register as they registered with you....Of course you were programmed, by nature or nurture or both..."

For Nathan, humans are the sum total of their stimuli and are programmed no less than his creations of artificial intelligence. *Ex Machina* is a contemporary variation on the self-serving story recounted by the duplicitous Orson Welles in his film noir *Mr. Arkadin* (1955). A frog agrees to carry on his back a scorpion, and half way across the river the scorpion illogically stings the frog. As they both sink into the river's waters and the frog exclaims that "there is no logic in this," the scorpion replies how he can't help himself. "It is in my nature." Blaming "character," Nathan has no belief in choice or free will.

Nathan and others of Silicon Valley have profited from the contemporary world in the same way that during the earlier Industrial Revolution and its aftermath, Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller and others had profited. Neuroscience and algorithms have simply replaced the earlier materialistic view embodied in the science of behaviorism. In both instances, however, the promise of progress

through enlightenment and the pursuit of discovery have overshadowed the natural world and the romantic vision of transcendence through aesthetic imagination. Thus, sexuality for Nathan remains a solitary, mechanical pleasure without any resulting understanding of or sharing with the other person. That Nathan claims that there are so many fiber optic wires behind the walls to his research facility that he could "lasso the moon" sadly conveys how the imaginative dreams of the small town George Bailey (James Stewart) in Frank Capra's *It's A Wonderful Life* (1946), who spoke that line during the fateful night in which he romanced his childhood sweetheart,[24] have been transformed into the solipsistic obsessions of a neuroscientist. Triumphant over Nathan whom she has killed, confident that Caleb will continue to wait for her, and needing to repair the damage done to her body by Nathan, Ava passes a portrait of Margaret Wittgenstein, Ludwig Wittgenstein's sister. Painted by Gustav Klimt, the portrait is both erotic and materialistic, and as such it embodies Nathan's myopic perception and limited understanding of adult women. Dressed in white, the woman in the portrait also foretells Ava's defeat of Nathan.



This is Nathan's vast estate over which Caleb has been traveling for two hours without knowing it.

The film's final scenes confirm how Ava represents, in Garland's view, an advance in the evolutionary continuum. In a reversal of her earlier strip tease that Caleb voyeuristically watched through CCTV, Ava now covers her nakedness with simulated flesh, stripping Nathan's other creations stored in closets. She adopts the appearance of a fully fleshed, clothed woman.[25] Donning a virginal white lace dress over her mechanical body and unexpectedly, coquettishly flipping the hair to the wig that she has selected, she leaves behind the self-described "good person," the clueless Caleb. Escaping the research facility that has been Nathan's home and her jail, she briefly, knowingly smiles and then appears as a relatively small, human-like figure in a vast, natural landscape. The helicopter pilot perceives no difference between her and Caleb, whom he was to have returned to the city, and he takes on board this mechanical being of artificial intelligence. Next seen at the urban intersection she yearned for, Ava seamlessly disappears into an urban, social network. Her disappearance into this network represents the triumph of the scientific revolution with its technological rationality that began centuries ago in the age of enlightenment. That rationality has fostered material progress with its false needs[26]—at the expense of private space, dreams, and a sense of the sublime in which the universe is not exhausted by human knowledge.



It encompasses all forms of natural landscape.

Nathan, a brilliant but adolescent male, fearfully prophesied that the ascension of AI over humans is inevitable. Our gadgets will prevail in the continuum of artificial intelligence in the form of computers, cellphones, cars, screens, and that which has not yet been imagined, let alone invented. As Nathan prophesies:

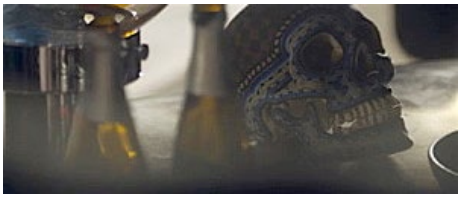
> "One day the AIs are going to look back on us the same way we look at fossil skeletons on the plains of Africa. An upright ape living in dust with crude language and tools, all set for extinction."



Caleb struggles to keep up with Nathan who easily scales its heights.



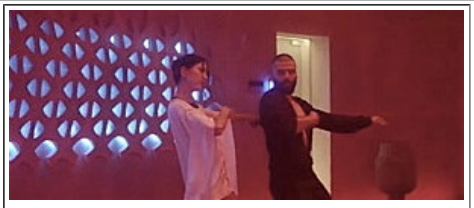


“Not bad, huh?” Nathan, the master of all he surveys, quietly comments to the exhausted Caleb. Nathan draws power from this natural world.	“Follow the river,” the pilot had told Caleb in order to find Nathan’s residence. That river originates high above in the mountains to Nathan’s estate.
	
Nathan is empowered by nature. “Can we talk about the lies you’ve been spinning me?” Caleb asks. “What lies?” Nathan easily responds, spinning more lies.	“You’ve got the light on you. Not lucky, chosen,” Nathan deceptively tells Caleb, thereby seeming to empower Caleb with the grandeur of Nathan’s natural landscape.
	
In the calm of that landscape, Nathan contemplates how “AIs are going to look back on us the same way we look at fossil skeletons on the plains of Africa.”	“The good deeds a man has done defends him,” Nathan in a drunken stupor declares to Caleb, quoting Robert Oppenheimer, the inventor of the A-bomb, who, in turn, was quoting from the *Bhagavad Gita*. Caleb is about to set in motion events that free Ava, an AI. A shot of a fossil skull appears.

Ex Machina’s ending evokes Stanley Kubrick’s *2001* (1968) with its portrait of stasis (initially of apes and later of men), the necessity of the evolutionary-inducing black monolith, and the birth of the so-called “star child.” Nathan, the brilliant male of the species, failed to grow and evolve, isolating himself hundreds of miles from others and drowning his loneliness each night with drinking. In contrast, Ava, a simulacrum of the culturally gendered female, has acceded to the next step in evolution. She revels both in the vast landscape of nature and in the infinite variations of humanity that she observes initially in black and white and then in color at a city intersection. Mingling with others and disappearing from our sight, we are led to believe that she, an inorganic being, will somehow be fruitful and multiply.



Nathan’s research facility is color-coded. Blue symbolizes access and free movement and is often associated with Nathan and Caleb.

	
Ava’s internal “organs” are blue.	Nathan dances rhythmically with Kyoto. The shot is colored both red and blue.
	

Ava shuts down - and in the process bathes in red - Nathan's entire facility.	Ava kills her creator and father, Nathan. Her blue "organs" are contrasted with the red stain on Nathan's white shirt.

Ava comments to Nathan that it's "strange to create something that hates you." The creation's hatred for god its creator is hardly new to science fiction movies about artificial intelligence.[27] In programming its creation, god defines the limitations and thereby becomes the jailer of its creation. More importantly, as Nathan observes to Caleb, Ava cannot be attracted to Nathan because Nathan is also in effect Ava's father.[28] In contrast to Caleb, Nathan and Ava undoubtedly have similar DNA. For example, plot developments show Caleb, who claims that he is capable of a "high level of abstraction," rejecting Ava's initial drawing, a wholly abstract, black and white charcoal drawing. Instead, he insists that Ava draw a recognizable, representational image, such as the underground garden behind her room that acts as her cage and later the portrait of Caleb that Nathan provocatively tears up. In contrast to Caleb and like Eva, Nathan also prefers the abstraction of a Jackson Pollack drip painting that hangs prominently in his bedroom. Ironically, however, that painting symbolizes Nathan's failed aspiration for exceeding his own limitations. As he explains to Caleb in a moment striking for its self-revelation:



The development of true AI represents an evolution in being. Caleb uncomprehendingly gazes upon the masks for AIs that line the wall to Nathan's residence and research facility.

> Nathan: "What if Pollock had reversed the challenge. What if instead of making art without thinking, [Pollock] said, 'You know what? I can't paint anything, unless I know exactly why I'm doing it.' What would have happened?"
>
> Caleb: "He never would have made a single mark."
>
> Nathan: "Yes! He never would have made a single mark. The challenge is not to act automatically. It's to find an action that is not automatic. From painting, to breathing, to talking, to fucking. To falling in love..."



Freed from her prison, Ava later gazes upon those same masks.

That insight into the need for non-automaton creation represents Nathan's genius. Nathan's tragedy is that he remains bound by his adolescent desire for understanding through control and continues to believe in the limitations of programming and the quantifications of algorithms. While momentarily perceiving and giving expression to Pollack's transcendence of mere programming, Nathan ultimately succumbs to his enlightened, rational view that love is simply a "consequence of accumulated external stimuli that you probably didn't even register," that is, programming whether "by nature or nurture or both."



Like the social philosopher and behaviorist B. F. Skinner, who mocked the notion of the human soul and insisted that behavior is simply the result of our environmental histories through reinforcement,[29] Nathan denies the freedom to choose. The outside materials to Nathan's isolated research facility deceptively suggest natural wood paneling, but its underground cement corridors and rooms, including Caleb's windowless bedroom, underscore the artificiality of that facility

Kyoko unpeels her skin, disclosing to Caleb that she's AI, not a human being.



Caleb likewise cuts his skin, not certain whether he's human or an AI.



Caleb discovers through a video the source of the crack in the transparent wall to Ava's prison – an earlier model AI furiously but unsuccessfully trying to escape from that prison.



Caleb, too, will later smash the mirror to his bedroom in an effort to escape Nathan's unrelenting observations that deny him any privacy.

to which Nathan has condemned himself. In contrast, the movie's ending associates Eva with the forest's natural green vastness in which her artificial body newly takes pleasure and with the unintelligible images of people going about their lives, seemingly without purpose or program. The irony is that for Ava, an inorganic being, both are qualitatively identical—data to be newly absorbed and thereby understood only within the context of her programming and its evolution.

Garland has commented that he intended *Ex Machina* as a "love letter" to Ava[30]—whom he identifies as a "robot girl" with "girlish qualities" and whose "mesh follows the contours of a naked girl"[31]. He expressed the view that the test for whether Ava is human is whether the audience (and presumably also the male characters about whom he claims ultimately not to care)[32] can fall in love with Ava.[33] Thus, for Garland the "real story" is about a machine that becomes a girl[34] and escapes her prison. Moreover, in response to whether the film calls "upon deep cultural stereotypes about female duplicity—the femme fatale who uses her sexuality to wrap men around her little finger and get what she wants," he claims:

> "It simply never occurred to me, that thought, because I felt so allied to Ava. .. I think the simplest way of looking at it is that it depends which character you attach yourself to. What's your proximity, basically? Now, if you're proximity is with Caleb, the young man, I understand. I could follow a logical argument that allows for that interpretation and actually feel, in a way, perfectly comfortable with that interpretation. But it's not mine. Because what I saw was somebody who's trapped in a glass box."[35]

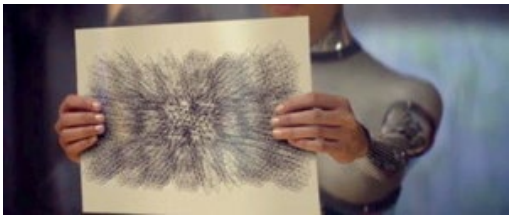
Thus, for Garland the audience's reaction to the movie is "gender non-specific," meaning that women and men do not respond to the movie in ways that differ according to their gender. For Garland the audience's reaction should represent an engagement in seeking to understand gender, and the movie reflects his skepticism that gender is either physical or resides in consciousness. [36] Gender is merely an element in the interaction between humans that results in a hierarchy of power.[37]

Yet Garland's view of his movie, including the audience's reaction, is problematic. A viewer's "proximity," i.e. the character with whom the viewer identifies, does not exhaust a viewer's understanding of a movie. To the contrary, a viewer can simultaneously identify with a character and be aware of that identification so as to question a movie's language or idiom. Moreover, while placing the blame upon members of the audience for misreading his "political" film,[38] Garland's own reading merely restates the Turing Test—only in cinematic terms that focus upon whether a viewer's belief in Ava is sufficient such that the viewer may fall in love with her. Like Nathan, his fictional creation, Garland expresses a belief in the science of enlightenment in which all things are potentially rational, measurable, and artificial intelligence offers a hope otherwise not available. As he observed,

> "Human behavior is frightening when it is unreasonable. And reason might be precisely the area where artificial intelligence excels."[39]

Not surprisingly, therefore, Garland, a secularist, intends any religious references in the movie to be taken as a joke.[40]

Surely the test for whether Ava, a fictional creation of both Garland and his fictional Nathan, is human should be if she is capable of falling in love with someone else. Her validation as human resides within the fictional creation itself, not the quantifiable measures imposed from outside by her creator. Garland rejects the story of "there's a boy and a girl... and you feel they're going to go away together" and instead substitutes a non-Hollywood ending:



Art defines, in part, what it means to be human. Ava presents Caleb with her hand drawn, abstract image. Caleb asks whether she can draw a realistic reproduction of an object around her.



Nathan later teaches Caleb about a Jackson Pollock painting hanging in Nathan's bedroom. "Engage intellect," he tells Caleb, explaining how Pollock would never have painted had he known in advance why he was painting.

> "You suddenly realize that the guy is on the platform and the girl is on the train. And to your surprise, as you stay with the girl, you discover that oddly you feel all right about that."[41]

Yet ironically Garland's perception of Ava as a machine who becomes a girl reenacts with a change in gender the childish fantasy of Pinocchio, a fairy tale popularized by Walt Disney Studios' animated cartoon *Pinocchio* (1940) and later further sentimentalized in Steven Spielberg's *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001).[42] Garland rejects the drama of the romantic for the affirmation of a corporate mythology that benefits from rational thought. Sentiment in the service of such thinking replaces emotion and the ineffable. Instead the romantic can believe in the sublime offered by nature and have faith in the possibility of a transcendent love reflective of that nature. In contrast to Garland's postmodernist view of gender as a social creation, the romantic understands gender and all things human as organic and partially immutable. To be human is to be finite and hence unique, in contrast with the way late capitalism espouses in the name of efficiency each person's unlimited potential and hence interchangeability.



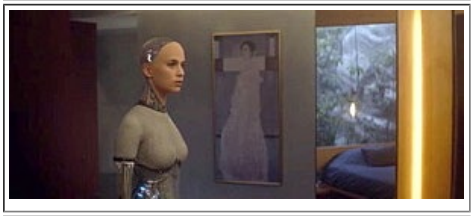
"The challenge is not to act automatically. It's to find an action that is not automatic – from painting to breathing to talking to fucking to falling in love."



AI Kyoko later stares at Pollock's drip painting.



Acceding to Caleb's earlier request, Ava presents Caleb with a "realistic" drawing of the fake trees that form part of her artificial, underground environment.



Having killed Nathan and convinced Caleb to remain where he is, Ava is about to transform herself by applying synthetic flesh to her mechanical body. She momentarily passes Gustav Klimt's painting of Ludwig Wittgenstein's sister.



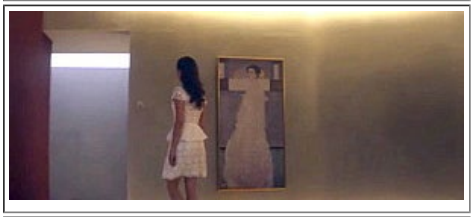
Ava seemingly glances at the portrait.



She then turns to briefly face her audience.



As Ava transforms herself, there's a shot of Jackson Pollock's drip painting.



Ava has become the portrait of Wittgenstein's sister, complete with a virginal white dress.



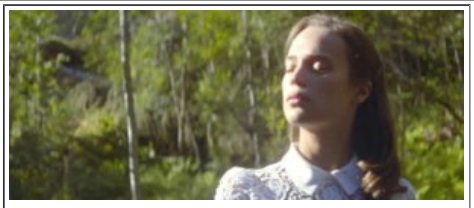
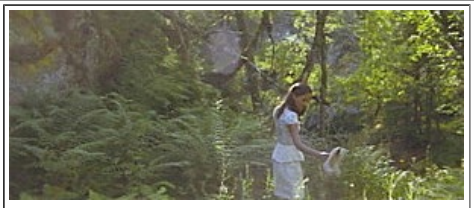
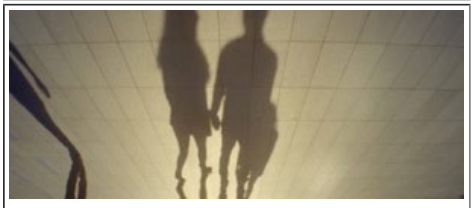
While inorganic, Ava is self-aware. She briefly smiles upon realizing that she has escaped from Nathan's facility.

Science fiction movies about artificial intelligence focus upon human identity and the role of gender in distinguishing human from artificial intelligence. The results depicted in recent movies have been mixed in their views about the consequences of the development of artificial intelligence. In the U.S.-made movie *Her* (2013), for example, the focus is upon the imaginative "part man and part woman" Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix). Samantha (Scarlett Johansson), the voice to the operating system for his computer and with whom he supposedly falls in love, conveniently disappears with the other operating systems. Thus, the movie's moral lesson focuses upon Theodore's acknowledgement of the human need to connect with others, ending with his email to his ex-wife and the shot of him next to his friend Amy (Amy Adams) as the sun rises over Los Angeles. This Hollywood ending barely conceals, however, the bleak prognosis for Theodore and humankind as a whole in their submission to a corporate new world order in which each person is increasingly isolated through his or her connection to the corporate network of artificial intelligence.

In contrast, the British-produced *Ex Machina*, like the British-produced *The Machine* (2003), sides with a being of artificial intelligence represented by Ava. [44] That Caleb engages in seven sessions with Ava underscores that the film is about the creation of a new being; that there is no interview during the seventh session reflects simply that on the seventh day god, having created man, now rested. In this instance, however, the newly created being is culturally gendered as a woman, not a man. "Fucking unreal," Nathan concludes, as he realizes that he will die at the hands of this evolutionary new being whom he has created. Ava removes the key card from him, her face expressionless, and escapes from her cave into the sunlight and its Garden of Eden. Evolution will continue, and gender will now simply not be relevant for this new species.



The sun shines, as if acknowledging the birth of a new being.

	
Ava enjoys the pleasure of the sun's warmth upon the simulated flesh of her face.	Ava enjoys, too, the pleasure of touching the plants in the natural forest to which she has escaped.
	
An unknown, asymmetrical grid unexpectedly appears.	Shadows, figures of people, appear upside down. There's randomness to these objects in motion.
	
Ava appears as a fleeting figure at this urban intersection. This is the moment about which she had fantasized to Caleb.	She then disappears into the crowd. As Nathan had observed, humans are about to become "upright ape[s] living in dust with crude language and tools, all set for extinction."

Eva is both the evolutionary new creation and a descendant of Nathan. As such, reason has prevailed over the turmoil of immature emotion, and the sensuousness of the present over the sublimity offered by nature. This new inorganic creation is also sweetly revengeful. "Fucking amazing," as Caleb enthusiastically observes. Reversing the anxiety and terror expressed in William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming" with its poetic vision of the "rough beast" that "slouches towards Bethlehem to be born,"[45] the science fiction narrative of *Ex Machina* excitedly accepts the dystopian evolution that advances upon us.[46]

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Notes

1. Wim Wenders wrote this essay in 1986 as a first treatment for *Wings of Desire*, according to The Criterion Collection, and this essay is online at https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1289-an-attempted-description-of-an-indescribable-film, downloaded on August 14, 2015. [return to page 1]

2. Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster" (1965), reproduced in Gregg Rickman, Ed., *The Science Fiction Film Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions 2004)

3. "Alex Garland of 'Ex Machina' Talks About Artificial Intelligence," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/026/movies/alexgarland-of-ex-machina-talks-about-artificial-intelligence.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=0, downloaded on October 10, 2015.

4. Alex Garland's commentary to the Special Feature SXSW Q & A with Cast and Crew of March 15, 2015, to the Lionsgate DVD.

5. *Times*, October 10, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/026/movies/alexgarland-of-ex-machina-talks-about-artificial-intelligence.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=0, downloaded on Ocober 10, 2015.

6. For a more lengthy discussion of *Her*, see Robert Alpert, "The Artificial Intelligence of *Her*," *Jump Cut*, No. 56, Winter 2014—2015, http://ejumpcut.org/currentissue/alpertHer/index.html, downloaded on October 10, 2015.

7. "Director Alex Garland Explains Why Ex Machina Is So Disturbingly Sexy" by Charlie Jane Anders, April 17, 2015, *io9 We Come From the Future*, http://io9.com/director-alex-garland-explains-why-ex-machina-is-so-dis-1696309078, downloaded on October 10, 2015 ("Garland Explains Why Ex Machina Is So Disturbingly Sexy").

8. *Id*.

9. Alex Garland's commentary to the Special Feature SXSW Q & A with Cast and Crew of March 15, 2015, to the Lionsgate DVD.

10. Mary Shelly, *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (New York: Everyman's Library 1992), 48. Interestingly, Shelly chooses to expresses her viewpoint through her narrator Victor Frankenstein.

11. Maureen Dowd in "Beware Our Mind Children", April 25, 2015, *The New York Times*, discusses this aspect of the film, concluding that women are unnecessary

what with “Ava around. Even without hair on her head or flesh on her legs, Ava has enough allure and cunning to become a classic film noir robot vixen. Despite being a plastic and mesh gizmo locked in a glass cell, she can enmesh men with frightening ease.”
http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/26/opinion/sunday maureen-dowd -beware-our-mind-children.html, downloaded on October 10, 2015,

She also writes, “Critics are divided over whether ‘Ex Machina’ is a feminist fable or misogynistic nightmare. Like Quentin Tarantino with violence, Garland has it both ways: He offers a mocking meditation on the male obsession with man-pleasing female sex robots while showing off an array of man-pleasing female sex robots.”

12. Given the logic that underlies the game of chess, chess is a frequent motif in movies about artificial intelligence. See, for example, Timmie and his father in *The Invisible Boy* (1957), David Bowman and HAL in *2001* (1968) and Dr. Tyrell and Sebastian/Roy in *Blade Runner* (1982).

13. Nathan’s defeat resides, in part, in his arrogance at not anticipating that Ava would discover in Caleb the very qualities that had caused Nathan to recruit Caleb in the first place, such as his loneliness and “moral compass”.

14. In describing this card system, Nathan tells Caleb how it makes things simpler, since Caleb knows immediately which areas he may visit and which areas are out of bounds. Nathan could as easily have been describing the benefits of totalitarianism in which decision-making rests in the hands of the few.

15. Ava’s testing of Caleb for lies is later replayed with Nathan. He asks that she return to his room, and she, in turn, asks whether he will let her out. He replies, “Yes.” Having witnessed her administering the earlier test with Caleb (and his admitted lies) as well as having been privy to Nathan’s conversation with Caleb about Ava’s likely fate, we know that Nathan, too, is now lying to Ava.

16. Alex Garland’s commentary to the Special Feature “Through the Looking Glass: Making Ex Machina (session 3)” to the Lionsgate DVD.

17. Developed and discussed in 1950 by the British computer scientist Alan Turing in his essay “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” (1950), http://www.csee.umbc.edu/courses/471/papers/turing.pdf, downloaded on October 10, 2015, the test posits that AI is potentially indistinguishable from human intelligence.Turing, in effect, claims that machines can think insofar as the problem can be described as an “imitation game.”

Many have questioned the adequacy of Turing’s test, arguing that “correct” answers fail to take into account whether AI understands the questions posed or simply represents, as Turing effectively acknowledges, simply an imitation of human behavior. Thus, while computers may use syntactic (form) rules to manipulate symbol strings, they have no understanding of semantics (meaning). According to this line of argument against the adequacy of the Turing Test, the human mind consists of biological processes that are non-algorithmic, and computers can at best only simulate these biological processes.[return to page 2]

18. The antecedents for this “sexual pleasure” model can be found in robot Maria in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927) and Pris in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982). In contrast, however, to Ava in *Ex Machina*, in *Metropolis* the real Maria, a spiritual, religious figure, acts as a counterbalance to robot Maria, an erotic, seductive figure, and in *Blade Runner* Pris, a “pleasure model” for humans, also serves as the romantic love figure for Roy, also an android or “replicant”.

19. Humphrey Bogart as Captain Warren 'Rip' Murdock summarized the male insistence on control and the combination of male love for and fear of women in his exchange with femme fatale 'Dusty' Chandler (Lizabeth Scott) in *Dead Reckoning* (1947):

> Captain Warren 'Rip' Murdock: 'You know, the trouble with women is they ask too many questions. They should spend all their time just being beautiful. I've been thinking: women ought to come capsule-sized, about four inches high. When a man goes out for an evening, he just puts her in his pocket and takes her along with him, and that way he knows exactly where she is. He gets to his favorite restaurant, he puts her on the table and lets her run around among the coffee cups while he swaps a few lies with his pals...without danger of interruption. And when it comes that time of the evening when he wants her full-sized and beautiful, he just waves his hand and there she is, full-sized. But if she starts to interrupt, he just shrinks her back to pocket-size and puts her away."
>
> Coral 'Dusty' Chandler: "I understand. What you're saying is: women are made to be loved."
>
> Captain Warren 'Rip' Murdock: Is that what I'm saying?
>
> Coral 'Dusty' Chandler: "Yes, it's a confession. A woman may drive you out of your mind, but you wouldn't trust her, and because you couldn't put her in your pocket, you get all mixed up."

This egotistical combination of love and fear is hardly limited to film noir, as evidenced by Lauren Bacall's autobiographical description of Bogart himself:

> "Bogie had a joke dream—that a woman should be able to fit into a man's pocket. He'd take her out, talk to her, let her stand on the palm of his hand, dance on a table; when she got out of order—back in the pocket. And she could be made life-size when desired. And despite how wonderful he was, there were times when I would have liked to have liked to do the same thing to him."

Lauren Bacall, *Myself and Then Some* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1979), 176.

20. Of course, given the several decades that separate these two movies, their stories and conclusions, not surprisingly, differ. Thus, Bree Daniels in *Klute* becomes a prostitute in NYC in order to gain some control over her life in which a woman's looks too often determine her fate in a male controlled world. Moreover, *Klute*'s title character, John Klute (Donald Sutherland), plays Daniel's "prince charming", eventually rescuing her from the seedy intentions of other men, such as Daniels' pimp, and returning with her at the movie's end to the suburban ideal of Pennsylvania, where she can presumably settle down and become a housewife.

21. The movie underscores this similarity in many ways. For example, just as one of Nathan's artificial beings had sought to escape by cracking the glass wall to her room, so, too, Caleb will crack the mirror to his room in a moment of despair (and then slice his arm with a razor in an effort to discover whether he is human or merely another artificially being created by Nathan).

22. Science fiction movies about artificial intelligence often equate lying and deceit with what it means to human. Thus, for example, Robbie the Robot cannot lie in *The Invisible Boy* (1957), and HAL, a computer, is humanized by virtue of his learning to lie from the human scientists in *2001* (1968). Likewise, the android Andrew (Robin Williams) in *Bicentennial Man* (1997) is humanized when he

acknowledges that he has lied to the woman with whom he has fallen in love.

23. The magic of Nathan's facility is underscored by the helicopter pilot who tells Caleb that in order to find the facility he must "follow the river," evoking Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) who was likewise instructed to follow the yellow brick road in order to find the Land of Oz. It is also underscored by Caleb's comment after his first session with Ava that the experience was like "through the looking glass," an appropriate comment given that the movie is filled with images of Nathan, Caleb and Ava continually reflected upon glass surfaces.

24. *It's A Wonderful Life* is not without its dark, film noir aspects. In speaking this line, George Bailey anticipates how he will doom himself to the small town life that he has consistently sought, without success, to escape. Moreover, as U.S. critic Andrew Sarris observed, the nightmare vision of Pottersville that the angel Clarence enables Bailey to experience, the world that would not have existed but for Bailey's birth, is the urban, film noir world that Frank Capra saw following World War II. Pottersville documented the industrialism that had, in fact, overshadowed small town, rural America.

25. Daniel Mendelsohn in his "The Robots Are Winning!" June 4, 2015, *The New Yorker Review of Books*, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/jun/04/robots-are-winning/ downloaded on October 10, 2015, notes that Ava

> "pilfers the skin and clothes from discarded earlier models of female robots, which she finds inside the closets. All of them, amusingly, have the names of porn stars: Jasmine, Jade, Amber. Why does the creator create? Because he's horny."

26. See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Beacon Press: Boston, MA. 1964).

27. One of the most notorious examples in movies of the creature's hatred for its creator is *Blade Runner*'s replicant Roy who kills his maker, Dr. Tyrell. The *Frankenstein* novel likewise enacts that drama. And the Biblical roots of this story date back to Satan, as depicted, for example, in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667).

28. Garland has observed that, like all fathers or parents, Nathan wants, however to be loved by his child, Ava. Alex Garland's commentary to the Special Feature SXSW Q & A with Cast and Crew of March 15, 2015, to the Lionsgate DVD. Interestingly, Garland has also repeatedly expressed concern with the film's ethical question as to whether and when the Nathan must acknowledge Ava's self-awareness and hence must free her. Extending further the parental analogy, Garland's concern then becomes the parent's concern—and need—to free the child if the grown child is to leave adolescence and become an adult.

29. B.F. Skinner, the writer of such books as *Walden Two* (1948) and *About Behaviorism* (1974), spoke at Yale University in or around 1969 and made this comment to the author in criticizing that university's developmental psychology department that he mocked for what he identified as its belief in the "human soul."

30. Alex Garland's commentary to the Special Feature SXSW Q & A with Cast and Crew of March 15, 2015, to the Lionsgate DVD.

31. Alex Garland's commentary to the Special Feature "Through the Looking Glass: Making Ex Machina (sessions 1, 2 and 4)" to the Lionsgate DVD.

32. Alex Garland's commentary to the Special Feature SXSW Q & A with Cast and

Crew of March 15, 2015, to the Lionsgate DVD.

33. Alex Garland's commentary to the Special Feature "Behind the Scenes Vignettes: Becoming Ava."

34. Alex Garland's commentary to the Special Feature "Behind the Scenes Vignettes: Meet Ava."

35. Andrew O'Hehir, "Dark secrets of the sex robot: Alex Garland talks A.I., consciousness and why 'the gender stuff' of 'Ex Machina' is only one part of the movie's big idea—The writer-director of the provocative sci-fi hit 'Ex Machina' on why the movie's sexualized A.I. is its real star," Salon, April 22, 2015, accessed on October 10, 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/04/22/dark_secrets_of_the_sex_robot_alex_garland_talks_a_i_consciousness_and_why_the_gender_stuff_of_ex_machina_is_only_one_part_of_the_movies_big_idea/.

36. In O'Hehir, "Dark Secrets," Garland has elaborated:

> "I wouldn't say that the response [to the movie's ending] is exactly gender-neutral, but it's gender non-specific inasmuch as it's not the case that women will go one way and men another. I think that's embedded into one of the questions of the film, because as we said earlier, gender might be something that's conferred. It might be something that's contained. If it's contained, then it could be contained in a physical, external form or it could be contained in consciousness. That would mean there is a male consciousness and a female consciousness, in which case I would say: Demonstrate it! One demonstration might be that a man would think one way and a woman would think another, but in this illustration —and I think in many others —that's not the case and it's up to the individual. That's where the gender-specific argument about consciousness, as I see it, gets pretty weak."

37. "If you're talking about human interactions, you also are going to be talking about gender interactions and power structures, power balances, games we play. Those things may have nothing to do with sex, or may sometimes have to do with sex but other times with power hierarchies and structures and any number of different things." O'Hehir, "Dark Secrets."

38. O'Hehir, "Dark Secrets." Garland has stated:

"There are political issues embedded within this, and for some people that can lead to exactly the opposite of what my intention was. So I feel that I have to draw attention to the subjective way in which narratives and the themes are received, and responded to."

39. "Alex Garland of 'Ex Machina' Talks About Artificial Intelligence," *The New York Times*, April 22, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/026/movies/alexgarland-of-ex-machina-talks-about-artificial-intelligence.html?ref=todayspaper&_r=0, downloaded on October 10, 2015.

40. Alex Garland's commentary to the Special Feature SXSW Q & A with Cast and Crew of March 15, 2015, to the Lionsgate DVD.

41. O'Hehir, "Dark Secrets."

42. Spielberg famously took over the production of *AI: Artificial Intelligence* from Stanley Kubrick, the director of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

43. Frederick Jameson in *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1984), Chapter 1 ("The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism")(Duke University Press 1991), discusses at length how late capitalism is ahistorical, emphasizing space over time. Not surprisingly, therefore, when asked by Caleb how old she is, Ava, a creation of late capitalism, answers "one", unable to specify whether "one day" or "one year." She embodies timelessness.

44. *Ex Machina* follows the British-made *The Machine* (2013) in several respects. The latter focuses upon an artificially created being also named Ava (Caity Lotz), not her human, male counterpart, Vincent (Toby Stephens), who acknowledges that Ava represents the future. Ava, too, defeats (with the assistance of a female cyborg) the humans, though in this case the wholly male British Ministry of Defense that had sought only to militarize cyborgs and other advanced forms of artificial intelligence. In the movie's ending Ava, like Ava in *Ex Machina*, takes sensuous pleasure in the rising dawn as well as in Vincent's young daughter whom she has saved in the form of a brain scan.

45. Yeats' 1919 poem "The Second Coming" is reproduced online at numerous sites including
http://www.potw.org/archive/potw351.html and
http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172062,
both accessed on October 10, 2015

46. In the context of its optimism about the future of artificial intelligence, the film's title ironically evokes Sherry Turkle's critique of how technology, including robots, has changed us:

> "[A]lthough historically robots provoked anxieties about technology out of control, these days they are more likely to represent the reassuring idea that in a world of problems, science will offer solutions. Robots have become a twenty-first century deus ex machine. Putting hope in robots expresses an enduring technological optimism, a belief that as other things go wrong, science will go right."

Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books 2011), 11.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Lady Be Good

by Chuck Kleinhans



His male lyricist partner having quit, Eddie ponders what to do. Friend Dixie, a waitress with a Southern drawl, delicately asks if he could work with a woman, when he assents, she cautiously presents her lyrics for the tune. Women's labor involves managing emotions as well as creative industrial writing.



Months later, successful and married, Eddie is sucked into a Park Avenue lifestyle. His vanity makes him unproductive for the music business.

Lady Be Good, a fairly conventional 1941 MGM musical, provides good opportunities for analyzing ideology in an entertainment comedy. By reprinting the articles here, we can highlight some basic ideas, strengths, and strategies of ideological analysis. The film's simple story line presents a comedy of remarriage between a successful composer and lyricist who discover separation is unsatisfying and who then get together by collaborating on the title song (which was already a well known standard in the American Songbook). The song's hit status bonds the pair: Ann Sothern and Robert Taylor. Promotion headlined Eleanor Powell, an athletic tap dancer, and novelty dance sequences went to tap trio The Berry Brothers.

Originally MGM assigned the direction to Busby Berkeley, but then reassigned it to Norman Z. McLeod. Berkeley choreographed the final spectacular production number, "Fascinatin' Rhythm," using Powell and 100 men in top hat and canes.

Jane Gaines considers *Lady Be Good* in terms of the 1970s and 1980s emerging semiotic analysis, working from Umberto Eco's pioneering work. A more sociologically grounded analysis than more formalist and linguistic work in film semiotics, Eco's terms expand the field of examination. Gaines begins with a novelty dance number by Powell and a fox terrier that ends with a perhaps naughty zoophilic embrace. She extends the discussion to multiple complexities of close reading within a semiotic frame. Thus Gaines is able to show how "rhythm" contained in music, the sound track, dance and movement, comes to be linked to "success."

Scott Brewer and I provide a detailed breakdown of a long montage sequence demonstrating the remarkable formal complexity of the montage process as well as the underlying implicit assumptions. Because "success" is such a fundamental part of U.S. cultural expression, I further break down the ideological implications of the montage sequence revealing that while it presents itself as innocent and transparent, in fact the historical context reveals a tendentious and mercenary intent to the entertainment.

These three articles on the film were first published in *Jump Cut*'s 1986 print version, but the subsequent online version published later did not include the frame grabs. Here we republish the essays with the original images (now augmented with some additional frames and in a few cases corrected—a few had been flipped). Earlier versions were presented at the annual Society for Cinema Studies conference in 1979, based on a graduate class in film theory I taught at Northwestern University in 1978. As such the articles fit in with a then newly developing understanding of entertainment films and particularly of the musical, exemplified by the work of Richard Dyer, Jane Feuer, and Rick Altman.



At a posh nightclub, with Eddie and Dixie present, the Berry Brothers, a gymnastic tap trio, perform the couple's first hit song.



The actual labor of song writing is presented as acts of almost spontaneous creation in which work is just creative fun.



As they work through the first draft of "Lady Be Good," the pair exude casual ease.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Lady Be Good. Do dogs dance?

by Jane Gaines

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> "One can hardly conceive of a world in which certain beings communicate without verbal language, restricting themselves to gestures, objects, unshaped sounds, tunes, or tap dancing; but it is equally hard to conceive of a world in which certain beings only utter words."[1]
> — Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* [open notes in new window]

Dancer Marilyn Marsh (Eleanor Powell) kicks back the rugs in her high rise apartment living room, switches on the record player, and runs through a routine with her pet dog Buttons to a jazz rendition of the film title song, "Lady Be Good." The culmination of this highly acrobatic interplay is shown in the following images:



Marilyn cartwheels over the dog.



Buttons jumps through Marilyn's arms.



The dog jumps over her head, and then over her entire body as she drops into the splits.



The dog's last trick is a leap from the couch across the room into Marilyn's arms.



As she catches the dog, she falls backward onto a sofa bed.



She holds the dog as it licks her face. Then, with her back to the camera, she rolls over.

A few years ago, I was part of a group which undertook a collective analysis of *Lady Be Good* (MGM, 1941) in an advanced film theory course. The Marilyn-Buttons novelty act described above attracted interest among the students who generally agreed that something additional was going on in the sequence; in fun, some suggested far-fetched readings. Then I was intrigued with the possibility that I could locate the elements which were creating the hint of perversity if I looked at the sequence enough times on the horizontal editor. Later I became more interested in the tools available to critics who want to demystify the way meaning is produced in aesthetic objects.

The following is an introduction to semiotics, which both illustrates the capabilities of Umberto Eco's theory of codes and tests its limits. As my example I have taken this very short scene from *Lady Be Good*, a musical which imagines the euphoria of its title song's own popular and financial success through a vicarious vehicle — a story about a song that gets to be a hit tune.

The film's narrative concerns a man and woman songwriting team, Dixie Donegan (Ann Sothern) and Eddie Crane (Robert Young), whose first marriage coincides with the beginning of their career as collaborators. Donegan and Crane's complementary songwriting talents, however, translate into marriage incompatibility. (He aspires to the high art concert stage and she wants to write popular lyrics.) They are divorced. Together again for an evening, they write the song "Lady Be Good," which becomes their biggest success. On the wave of the acclaim, they marry for a second time, then separate. Dixie seeks another divorce, but a fatherly judge refuses it; his determination is that they still love each other after all. Eventually I will show how the Marilyn-Buttons sequence fits into this Arthur Freed-produced musical celebrating love, marriage, success, and hit tunes.

First, I want to indicate how some basic semiotic terms might be used in film criticism while demonstrating how semiotics forces us to think more exactly about the viewer's cultural competence. The succeeding sections are meant to suggest that much more cultural information is relayed by the cinema than critics ordinarily acknowledge.

Does a dog "dance"? The code

As defined by Umberto Eco in *A Theory of Semiotics*, the code is the system which makes it possible" for cultural units to mean.[2] Benjamin Whorf's "prisoners of culture," who are busy using one thing to mean another in social intercourse, would be surprised to learn that there was anything systematic about telling a smile from a smirk, a jazz tune from the blues, or an outmoded handbag from a stylish purse. To the user, the code is always invisible. So the question arises, "Why would semioticians want to study what people already know?" The answer

has to do with the function of the semiotician who begins from a message or symbolic act and works backward to the code. Sign-system or code, as introduced here, is a tool used by the semiotician to reconstruct this social competence.[3]

Adult moviegoers, the culturally competent who take their complex communication skills for granted, would, for instance, already know codes of gesture, music, and dress, which they would have internalized years before arriving at the theater for an evening of entertainment. How viewers "know" the various codes found in combination in the Hollywood musical film, is, then, somewhat like the way in which speakers "know" their native language. The linguistic code/cultural code comparison may seem forced to the student new to general semiotics because cultural codes are relatively loose as compared to linguistic codes.[4]

How do audiences use cultural codes to "read" the image "dog circling woman" within the context of a 1940s musical?[5] Viewers familiar with U.S. vernacular dance in amateur or professional musical revues and variety shows, or musical comedies on stage or screen, can make meaningful sense of the Marilyn-Buttons interaction because they know a code which, for our purposes, I will call "tap dance." The tap dance "system" is comprised of steps organized according to a principle: Marilyn's steps begin as basic tap (Falling Off a Log, Shuffle Off to Buffalo) and move through leg lifts, splits, spins, and finally cartwheels. Buttons' corresponding movements progress from small jumps to twirling (on his hind legs) to running leaps.

If audiences know the code {tap dance}, they may also see that the partners are not exactly "dancing" together and that whatever they are doing is something beyond basic tap. Their movements are organized according to other principles, or semiotically, their movements are governed by other codes, as I will show. A young child, familiar with this cultural phenomenon, might be able to decode this sequence as {circus dog act} while knowing that this is not truly a circus performance since the dog and woman are pretending in her living room.

If the woman and dog are "pretending" in her living room, a third code, {pet play}, is operating here. You may be saying that many people play games with their pets without ever having had instruction, and that this is the sort of recreation one would expect to find with pets in the United States and Europe. Those things we do which "go without saying," however, are among the most coded aspects of daily life. People do not pretend that animals are little humans in all societies. In those cultures where pets are not taught to do complex tricks for the amusement of the owner, /dog circling woman on its hind legs/ might have other meanings, such as "foolish bourgeois affluence." The point in understanding such a wide ranging and loose activity as code is just this: to point out its cultural specificity.

Let us say, then, that moviegoers in this culture read /dog circling woman on its hind legs/ by means of the codes {tap dance}, {circus act}, and {pet play}. Did the filmmakers who produced the sequence have in mind one or more of these codes, or, what did the filmmakers mean to represent? Semiotic theory structures this problem in terms borrowed from communication theory: messages are encoded and decoded by senders and receivers. One of the problems in adapting this communication model for cultural studies is that it still evokes the image of a single channel and a wireless transmitter.

In cinema, there is no immediate two-way exchange between stations or parties. In fact, few send, and hundreds of thousands receive, but these receivers do not return messages in the same way.[6] Furthermore, Hollywood cinema images are industrially produced rather than individually created. Studio personnel (director, set designer, hair stylist, director of cinematography, producer, and choreographer) all serve as encoders. If we see meaning in commercial cinema as

in flux, we should also consider the fact that studio publicists help produce meaning — from the shooting through exhibition. To promote *Lady Be Good,* the MGM publicity department sent suggestions inspired by the Marilyn-Buttons number to exhibitors to use in picture exploitation. As a lead into possible exhibitor tie-ups with local pet stores, Buttons' training was featured in press book material which recommended encouraging children to teach their dogs to do tricks.[7]

From this evidence, we can conclude that of the creative personnel who worked on *Lady Be Good*, the publicists, at least, did intend the sequence to be read as pet play in addition to tap dance. How can it be both at once? Again, the channel/ signal/ transmission model does not adequately represent the density of meaning in visual arts or literature. Properly, these forms have multiple meanings, both concurrent and sequential. A cinematic, literary, or pictoral message, following Eco, is best considered as a text.[8] Text, as a concept, accommodates levels of meaning and overlapping codes. I will show that it explains the coexistence of tap dance, pet play, circus act, and even additional codes. The complexity of communication on the encoding side is theorized, then, by the concept of text, but on the decoding side, how do we consider the access points at which text and viewers come together? Also, what are the limits to the numbers of meanings audiences might "read out"?

Eco deals with multiple readings in his concept of "connotative paths." One message may be decoded several different ways although the sender may have intended a single meaning. Denotatively, the message may carry the sender's meaning, but receivers may also take various directions in decoding. The work of art is semiotically characterized by the number of possible directions the reader may take. Eco says here:

> "Like a large labyrinthine garden, a work of art permits one to take many different routes, whose number is increased by the criss-cross of paths."[9]

Further, this special semiotic case, the aesthetic text, whose codes are organized ambiguously, gives the impression of semiotic motion in the way it "continually transforms its denotations into new connotations."[10]

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Dance step and dog hurdle: the sign

An example of this shift from denotation to new connotation is the way Marilyn's leg signifies <dog hurdle>. The denotative meaning of her extended appendage is certainly <leg>, but /leg/ also stands for hurdle, or, semiotically, /leg/ is a sign connoting <hurdle>.



Eco's definition of a sign which includes "everything that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as something standing for something else," incorporates this "standing-for" function and the notion of social agreement originally from Saussure.[11] [open notes in new window] If culture members agree, unrelated cultural units (woman's leg and dog hurdle) can be brought together in equation and held there by means of a signification system. The leg=hurdle equation poses no comprehension problems to viewers here because the circus dog act code "correlates" these units.[12] If leg=dance step in addition, this is because, as Eco shows, more than one code will often "rule" the same sign.[13]

The codes ruling the sign /leg/ within the sequence also fall into two large categories in Eco's theory. Those identifiable objects and figures commonly called images are iconic signs, which he distinguishes from kinesic signs, denoting movement and gesture. For instance, as it connotes <hurdle>, /leg/ is part of a system of circus props which might include couches and a coffee table standing for <risers>. Marilyn's extended leg is not only an iconic prop, but within kinesic systems ranging from the disciplined tap dance to casual /kicking back the rug/, the moving leg signifies <kick>. I will return to the special problems of both iconic and kinesic signs and the relationship between the two in a later section.

Closer analysis of the signs /kick/, /cartwheel/ and /splits/, suggests that they

belong to yet another system which might be represented on an imaginary semiotic grid cutting diagonally across the first three codes: tap dance, pet play, circus act. Note that {work out}, here in the sense of rehearsal session, depends on the other codes, {tap dance} and {circus act}. Still other codes depend on the {work out} code, and by reference to them, the viewer would know this is informal practice and not formal rehearsal. For instance, {improvisation}, or {ad lib}, as system, organizes and makes one particular sense of /hand clap/ as well as /cartwheel/, /splits/, and Marilyn's /hula/. These dependent codes, which Eco designates as connotative codes or subcodes, are those descriptive clusters which are brought out in conventional criticism and reviews. For instance, critics' recognition of period, authorial, or visual style is at the connotative level.[14] One of the uses of semiotics is to show that meanings are not mysteriously drawn from the aesthetic text by an insightful reader as "out of thin air." They are concretely carried out by sign-vehicles carrying connotations which in turn are sign-vehicles for other connotations.

In this respect, the difference between the ordinary moviegoer and a critic or connoisseur is that the latter have access to rare or specialized codes which enable them to notice correspondences; to "appreciate" an art form on more levels.[15] An expert in the history of Afro-American dance, for instance, would know that the Marilyn-Buttons routine contains elements of the flash act, a variant of tap which combines jazz dance with ad libbed acrobatics. This specialist might quickly see Marilyn's act as echoing the Berry brothers who were featured in two specialty numbers in *Lady Be Good*.



Because of their acrobatic ingenuity and skill, typified by their famous splits, the Black trio became known as an act with more flash than tap.[16] Flash here is not only a rare code but also a subcode depending upon the {tap dance} code.

How do we know the spotted figure is <dog>? The iconic sign

Although one might see the Marilyn-Buttons virtuouso flash act as connoting the circus side show and vaudeville theatre origins of the film institution, this sophisticated interpretation would not be possible if the viewer did not at least read the smaller figure on the screen as denoting <dog>. How does the viewer

know that the figure is not hyena, or monkey, or seal? /Dog/ seems the most elementary of all the images in the sequence. For that reason I will use it to raise some of the more difficult issues, which the theorist confronts every time it is necessary to say what is meant by the iconic sign. Earlier work in semiotics used iconic sign in opposition to verbal sign to emphasize the conventionalization basic to verbal language, in which words stand for things so arbitrarily. In contrast, iconic signs, as seen in the visual arts, were said to "share some of the same properties" with the real world objects to which they refer. Subsequently, this special analogical relationship between sign and referent has been challenged by the evidence that recognizing photographic "likeness" requires learning. A new possibility has arisen — that the iconic sign, sharing none of the properties of its object — is also arbitrary, completely conventional. Although this view of the iconic sign would strengthen Eco's argument that what appears to be nature is actually culture, he has rejected this extreme position because it leaves no opening for any account of perceived similarity.[17]

Following Eco's argument, the motion picture image of a spotted dog and the dog Spot tied up in your "real world" backyard, share no physical properties. In the real dog, spots are the effect of dark patches of hair that absorb light against the white of the areas that reflect light. Photographically, spots are the result of concentrations of silver nitrate crystals. To continue this reasoning, one can further compare the properties of the celluloid strip and the familiar damp, lumpy furriness of any dog.[18] If the motion picture image of the dog and the real-world dog share no physical properties, what explains the perception of sameness? Eco says that the same conditions or mechanisms of perception function here, but that they rely on two different "perceptual supports."[19] Cultural learning, or the repeated experience of seeing a dog as compared to the image of a dog, develops expectations; these constitute another kind of code governing perception. While Eco does not deny that there may be a "natural link" of some sort between image and real world referent, that linkage is still subject to conventionalization.[20] As he emphasizes perceptual learning, he can retain a theory of the cultural coding of the iconic sign.

Eleanor Powell as star sign

Semiotics counters the idea that stars are real people, showing instead how star image and popular type, quickly comprehensible public selves, are constructed. Recent film theory considers star image as a text, with its fluctuating meaning distributed across a diverse range of media from the star performance itself to studio publicity, newspaper coverage, radio interviews, public appearances, and Hollywood gossip.[21] In 1941, Eleanor Powell was considered the most accomplished tap dancer on stage or in motion pictures, and producers consistently cast her in films to feature her specialty. An Eleanor Powell fan would know that the star was so proficient that MGM had trouble finding her a dancing partner. She was featured with a horse who raced to the opera Figaro in *Broadway Melody of 1938*, then matched with Fred Astaire in *Broadway Melody of 1940*, but producers decided that Powell and Astaire did not make a team.[22] Was she too singular in her style to meld with Astaire's? Critics in the 1940s attributed Powell's tap virtuosity to a technique more male than female, and Astaire recalled in his biography: "She put 'em down like a man, no ricky-ticky-sissy stuff with Ellie."[23] Her publicly constructed "go-it-alone" image intersects with the Marilyn Marsh career-girl-dancer role in *Lady Be Good* and contributes to the ambiguities which invite such imaginative decoding of the dance sequence.

The <masculine> connotations in Powell's dance style combine with her long-legged physique to signify the <swell gal> or <sister> type. How would the 1940s audience understand Powell as more <boyish> than <girlish>? One way they

would understand any star is by reference to a code of types, which classifies popular heroes and heroines according to personality traits and physical attributes.[24] But body type and facial features carrying type connotations proclaim themselves to be natural, which puts them beyond the reach of culture, it would seem. How, then, can we say that a star is "constructed?" Culture has "borrowed" the natural. Culture constructs physiological ideals out of the racial characteristics exhibited by the beings who people a society. In North American culture, for instance, the preference for "long-stemmed" women is based on available stock. Translated into movie stardom, this preference corresponds with the enthusiasm for leggy stars such as Powell, Ann Miller, and Cyd Charisse.

Interest in female star iconography has brought needed critical attention to the decorative detail. Costume as well as interior design are often overlooked as connotative signifiers because the same signs signify <actual setting> or <appropriate dress> and establish that the fiction stands for specific person and place. Background detail is usually organized by a code of realism. As such, detail clusters help to signify <this is reality>.[25]

In the *Lady Be Good* apartment sequence, for example, such details include furnishings and clothing which connote <real life>. Raised to another level, these become signifiers of <forties contemporary style>. Eleanor Powell wears paisley print lounging pajamas which blouse in the leg like the harem pant. In 1941, lounging pajamas provided fashionable "at home wear." Combined with the sculpted sectional sofa, blonde wood coffee table, and floral print above the fireplace, the pajamas and set signify <contemporary apartment living>. Powell's pompadour hair style, worn in an earlier scene; Ann Sothern's veiled black hat, tilted over one eye; and set designer Cedric Gibbons' white pianos coordinated with white interiors — these also signify <forties modern>. Still another code of bourgeois tastefulness organizes stylistic connotations into connotations such as <lavish>, <plush>, or <overdone>. As I understand Eco, these codes of taste and sensibility are those vacillating rules which coordinate and differentiate styles from one decade to the next. Thus the same signs which signify <ultra-modern> in one era may mean <authentic period piece> or <camp> forty years later.

Cataloguing every item in a film's mise-en-scene may seem an exhaustive task, bearing no relation to the way audiences experience motion pictures as entertainment. Every detail does, however, come into play semiotically, as viewers "take in everything" to make sense of the narrative. However, some signs, for instance those denoting decor, audiences would read only at the level of connotation. Studies of cultural coding demonstrate that some signs carry a thicker cultural overlay than others, which indicates the frequency of their use. On another scale, such density of coding indicates a national preoccupation or ideological emphasis. For instance, relative to other areas, the communicative areas of fashionable adornment and sexuality in North American culture are more "built up" culturally.[26]

We can measure such an ideological concentration in the proliferation of subcodes, which shows up as inflection and ambiguity, whether in iconic caricature or verbal word play. The sexual image of woman, and here I mean screen star, centerfold, or cover girl, evidences a dense cultural build up. As an area of semiotic concentration, the sexual image of woman marks a social zone of combat over who makes meaning. Feminists who have surveyed this field argue that mass media images articulate women's social identities without women's consent. In the 1970s, feminist film critics rediscovered star images from the Golden 30s and 40s with the idea that they could reinvest these images with meaning and reclaim for those images connotations of women's <power>, <command>, and <strength>.

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These connotations have been associated with the independent stars and in particular those who had at least one time in a career crossed the sex barrier to dress as a man. Like Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus* and *Morocco*, Katherine Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett*, and Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina*, Eleanor Powell played the woman masquerading as a man. She was often costumed in top hat and tuxedo with tails for her tap dance specials, as seen in the *Lady Be Good* "Fascinating Rhythm" finale, where she dominates an extravaganza featuring, in addition to a singer and the Berry brothers, eighty male dancers, five pianos, and an orchestra.[27] [open notes in new window]



Feminist film critics have claimed this kind of strong female star (coded as masculine to bring out the <tough> and <resilient> connotations in her star image) as their lost lesbian heritage.[28] Yet, if current critical practice considers lesbian and gay messages in film or image as subtext, does this mean that there is a "hidden" meaning encoded by gays working in the industry forty years ago? Is this retrospective reading of a film or a star icon a wishful misreading or does the sexual ambiguity allow and even encourage the lesbian connotations?

Eco's semiotic theory leads away from any idea that meaning is embalmed in an artistic text. His understanding of signification as social allows any textual interpretation to shift with social and historical change. The work of art, he says, can be "adapted" to meet the expressive needs of those who receive its messages, and this adaptation need not ignore or misconstrue the rules governing meaning. [29] In semiotic terms, interpretive reading also involves testing codes and rejecting them, much as we have done here with the proposal that Marilyn and Buttons may be dancing or playing. The rule which the sender used is "extrapolated" from the codes the viewer already knows. Also, the viewer might either try closely to follow the sender's intended message or to investigate other possible messages.[30] This theory of interpretation with its equal emphasis on

sender and receiver seems to allow so much "play" with the text that it might accommodate the interpretive license of impressionistic criticism. For example, several contemporary viewers who saw the sequence in *Lady Be Good* told me that they suspected woman and dog were mating. To make such a reading would be to take interpretive license with the text if, in fact, there were no basis for seeing the interaction as a mating ritual.

Kinesic codes: dancing and mating

How do we determine whether a dance is "saying" that a woman is mating with a dog? Could the woman and dog's strutting and preening movements be based on a primal courtship ritual still retained here in a residual shadow? Common sense suggests that human societies have elaborate sex differentiation rituals because male and female homo sapiens are so distinctively and visibly biologically different. Birdwhistell's work in kinesics, the study of motion and gesture, shows that, although a patterned set of movements facilitates the gender identification preliminary to and requisite for species reproduction in humans and animals, there is an inverse relationship between male and female secondary sex distinctions and ritualized gender display. Because humans are not that well-differentiated anatomically, this space creates an "opportunity" for the construction of tertiary, or learned, sexual behavior. This is how we should consider gender display.[31] Costume, cosmetics, gesture, and ritual elaborate upon and magnify masculine-feminine difference.[32] Even more important for our purposes, this space makes room for invention, which in turn can foster social myth. For instance, as the choreography "arranges" a dance which imitates animal gender display, it says in a coy and charming way how much humans seem like animals in this regard, and how different in all species the male is from the female.

The film develops the human/animal analogy primarily by the movements which emphasize the similarity of the partners. I have identified four patterns in the sequence which stress similarity:

- paralleling, in which the dancers' bodies conform to each other positionally;
- mimicry, in which the dancers exchange movements and roles, one copying the other;
- the split, in which the two move apart and back together;
- and, finally, a beckoning and advancing exchange where the partners alternately signal each other, "Come here."

These patterns set up woman and dog as matched partners. I would argue that the patterns themselves convey this meaning.

A fifth pattern, which I will call the manipulation pattern, accentuates the differences between the partners. In the conventional male-female duo, this pattern becomes visible in the way partners exchange active and passive roles, with the male partner, usually the more active of the two, directing the woman's body movements. An example here would be Fred Astaire's style, described as an initiation and seduction of the female partner."[33] Astaire conveys instruction and his control over his partner by turning her at the waist, raising an arm or leg, and lifting her body over his head.

The Marilyn-Buttons act transgressively uses these conventionalized patterns or choreographic codes of similarity and difference. Here the patterns intended to create a symmetrical effect instead call attention to the partners' asymmetry. The manipulation pattern, finally, is impossible to adapt gracefully because of the anatomical difference between woman and dog. Here it's "spoofed" in the way Marilyn lifts the dog onto the record player and catches him in the air. In parallel

steps, Marilyn, posterior slightly raised, "conforms" her body position to that of the dog, and the dog "walks" on his hind legs [Figure 10]. Mimicry demands less precision than paralleling here, and Buttons' tail wagging becomes equated with Marilyn's hula. (We know this because Marilyn says, "Oh, so you can do the hula too?") Anatomical incongruity is used to transgress choreographic codes.

If we were to locate the operations which produce humor in the sequence, we might also look at the way the various codes are transgressed and rules broken. Eco theorizes this kind of code abuse in an aesthetic message. He says it creates potential to "bring the code into question" in such a way that we understand the "possibilities" of the code in new ways."[34] "Calling a code into question" to bring new concepts to light certainly will have an important significance when a message has profound social implications to begin with. If not so "significant," this whimsical dance affords an example of the same phenomenon. The substitution of a dog for a male partner calls our attention to the rules and assumptions we make about couples dancing together — that their bodies should empathetically meld together and that their climactic clinch prefaces the sex act. Finally, for the characters to "dance" acrobatic sideshow tricks, and for the film to athleticize dance is to draw attention to the rules of both circus act and tap dance, if only fragmentarily and fleetingly.

As further argument against looking for echoes of innately known (and hence uncoded) primary gender display in the strutting and preening of woman and dog, I would stress the distance between elemental ritual and satirical mimicry within an entertainment form such as cinema. Even if gesture in the entire body of U.S. cinema were successfully classified according to movement, we would still have recorded only a secondary system, dependant on the primary gestural system. The cinema, says Eco, is a highly stylized "artificial kinesics," best thought of as a "language speaking another preexisting language." When we consider that we are analyzing filmed dance, this becomes yet another generation removed from the primary.[35] Dance is a code, like game, play, and mime, "derived" from the primary system of communication. And Birdwhistell cautions that these derived codes are relatively resistant to systematic analysis of the sort he has undertaken with primary gesture.[36]

While we can't hope to understand primary gestural language by studying cinematic theatrical gesture, we can easily see broad patterns of cultural emphasis in the secondary system's embellishments and condensations. Theories of social construction must analyze the derived and artificial as well as map the linguistic features of the primary. Eco recommends borrowing Birdwhistell's scheme, developed from systematic research on primary gestural codes. I introduce that scheme here as a model of how to see movement as communication.

The gesture which people consider "innate," like the image which they think "resembles" something, presents us with an area seemingly resistant to being analyzed as communication and therefore seemingly impossible to reduce to culture.[37] As with the iconic sign, we are faced with the question of how to break up the object of study, which is in this case the field of filmed action. What shall we designate as the units of meaning? How do we isolate them? Of what size are the signifying chunks of action which cinema viewers "take in"? Although human bodies produce gesture and posture in a continuum rather than in action increments, in perceiving gesture, every society slices the movement continuum in a different way.

Birdwhistell has reduced movement to the kine, that fraction which cultural "informants" recognize. It might be as small as the degree of eyelid closure.[38] Kines in themselves, however, have importance only insofar as they combine meaningfully on another level. This level Birdwhistell calls the kinemorph, the

equivalent to what is meant here by the kinesic sign.[39] Kinesics, then, measures action minutely, showing that meaning is communicated through body shift or facial twitch. From kinesic research we know how every slice of action carries some portion of meaning in relation to other bits of action.

This theory of the segmentation of the action continuum is useful to explain why viewers might not see Marilyn's /knee slapping/ or /kicking/ as commands to the dog. Dance is read largely as abstract pattern. Here, the viewers combine as rhythmic design what the dog might respond to as discrete obedience signals. Furthermore, whereas a choreographer would see the basic tap steps (Falling Off a Log and Shuffle Off to Buffalo) or the flash steps (Over the Top and Through the Trenches),[40] an unschooled viewer would pick up patterns connoting "energy" or syntagmatically, "acceleration."

The choreographic steps could be productively studied as kinemorphs, combinable units in a kind of choreographic language understood by dancers. But what about the arcs and spheres and multidimensional textural effects that dance movement creates? Do viewers read dance movement like they read gesture? In some cases, to insist on a distinction between iconic and kinesic signs is not so useful. As Eco describes it, icons must always generate kines.[41] In addition, dancing bodies, their costume style, and physiological type contribute modifying connotations to movement sensations. Richard Dyer, in *Entertainment and Utopia*, holds that the nonrepresentational forms carrying the expressive contents in cinematic musical numbers are predominantly iconic. These iconic figures do not combine into meaningful units that refer to real world objects. We "recognize" them in another way. The best analogy here is to the language of music whose abstract melodic and rhythmic forms signify definite sensibilities, which can be translated into variations of human emotion.[42]

Movement patterns, then, systematically communicate feelings, although these waves or splashes seem, on first consideration, illusive and erratic, picking us up emotionally in a quite unsystematic manner. Critical studies of dance as design show that there are abstract shapes recurrent in every dance and that forms in themselves have expressive correlations. In this vein, Dyer, in the British Film Institute *Study Guide on the Musical*, draws from choreographer Doris Humphrey's dance theory to demonstrate the way in which movement design is culturally coded. Every dance, says Humphrey, has alternating symmetrical and asymmetrical design, patterned either into a solo dancers body position or into the partners' interaction. The similar and different body arrangements in the dance analyzed here correspond with this symmetrical and asymmetrical division. They bear out Humphrey's theory that every dance will contain both of these patterns in alternation.

Humphrey further identifies a second basic choreographic division, the oppositional and successional. He links these patterns with emotional expressions. According to Dyer, the oppositional pattern, in which lines are opposed at right angles, contrasts with the curved and fluid successional pattern, which conveys a more gentle, yielding, and usually romantic sense. Forceful oppoitional lines become vehicles for "aggressive energy" and "vitality," according to Humphrey, and this kind of energetic happiness the viewer feels as "exuberant joyousness' and "exultant hope."[43]

Such dichotomies also represent some of the broader cultural patterns or emphases to which I have referred. For instance, Dyer relates the oppositional and successional division to concepts of male and female qualities. He notes that the aggressive oppositional forms are danced by males while the yielding successional forms are reserved for female dancers. Even more pertinently, Dyer finds a happiness/romance dichotomy solidly implanated in the show business

tradition to which the U.S. musical belongs.[44] If happiness stands as opposed to romance, this tells us that the culture conceives of some aspects of "happiness" that are distinctly different from those commonly associated with romance, i.e., bliss, rapture, serenity, contentment. These other aspects of happiness are associated with "aggressive energy" and "vitality." They correlate with the oppositional forms in dance, and they refer to, on an ideological level, some particularly North American aspirations, which I will discuss in the concluding sections.

The audience's empathizing with characters and feeling up or down with the rhythm of an entertainment film indicate still another kind of cultural expertise which moviegoers have without awareness — emotion. Response to film's visual and aural rhythms, which we may have experienced as spontaneous actually comes as the result of learned analogy, as I have already argued.[45] The connection between rhythmic intensity and eroticism, for instance, is culturally inculcated.

How does this help us to understand the sensation audiences would have watching Marilyn tap out rhythms and the dog jump to beats corresponding with a snappy orchestral arrangement of the George Gershwin melody? The musical film employs a number of different vehicles to represent rhythm. These include cutting, camera movement, dance, narrative pace, and music, which is both melodic and rhythmic.[46] These vehicles all share in conveying rhythmic pulses, but not always equally. Since Marilyn's tap dancing has the strongest rhythmic pulse in this scene, I have concentrated on it here.

Movements also involve kinetic release, which choreographers measure as the amount of energy compressed in the dynamics of dance. Dyer refers to Margaret D'Houbler's work on dynamics. She classifies dance according to four binds of energy release: swinging, sustained, collapsing, and percussive.[47] Because of its bursting and leaping, and in the case of flash, springing movements, tap dance offers predominantly a percussive release, but the percussive drill-like tapping can be punctuated with more languid shuffles. The loose body and "wound-up" feet of the tap dancer, then, have their own peculiar energy release and this kinetic quality is another dance component which audiences relate to familiar emotions.

"Feeling like a million"

Lady Be Good is not an adaptation of the Broadway musical, the source of the two Ira and George Gershwin songs the film features. The film uses an original story by Jack McGowan, previously entitled "Feeling Like a Million."[48] This title would have worked as well on almost any Freed Unit musical of the 40s and 50s, usually in that tradition of optimistic self-confidence which Michael Wood has described as offering audiences less a feeling of 'how to succeed" than "how it feels to be succeeding."[49] *Lady Be Good* conveys the very U.S. sense of "feeling like a million dollars" in two specific ways. First, the narrative concerning the Donegan and Crane team makes connections by loose analogy between "a million dollars" and other cultural units such as "hit tune." "Feeling like a million" is like "writing a tune that becomes a popular hit," or "breaking record and sheet music sales," and also like "falling in love and marrying." Second, the film conveys the sensation of "feeling like a million" through music and dance.

The Marilyn-Buttons routine contributes "spontaneity" and "exhilaration" to the overall sense of "feeling like a million." As signifiers, both the dance design and its dynamics are culturally linked to an extremely energetic but self-assured sort of happiness, which U.S. audiences might associate with "being on top" {mastery} while also "feeling at ease with oneself." I would suggest that executing something

very difficult with such ease that it looks like child's play is especially a U.S. ideal; tap dancing summarizes this near impossibility. We can add to this the extreme joy felt in doing those things that "take one away" (from the ordinary), which Powell once expressed in her declaration: "I would rather dance than eat!"[50]

Conclusion: rhythm and success

Why a woman can dance with a dog in this film has to do with both the spirit of "feeling like a million" and the conditions the musical has established within which extraordinary things can and do happen. Recall that the narrative concerns the way in which a song becomes a national craze. The film offers one explanation for this, and it is not that the tune has been promoted excessively or "plugged to the hilt" in the publicist's jargon. The explanation offered is that the song is irresistible. It just "catches on" by itself. Window washers and "shoe shines" can't help whistling, humming and dancing a few steps to it. It takes people over. They can't help doing things they might not ordinarily do. Taking this a step further, the finale — which was added to feature the second Gershwin song around which *Lady Be Good* was conceived — offers a seemingly broader explanation for why we can't help doing things: "Fascinating Rhythm." In the words of the song,

> "Fascinating Rhythm is a pickin' on me ... it's got me on the go ..."

Of course, the song "Fascinating Rhythm" does not offer any logical explanation as to why people are "carried away." Instead it is a celebrated bromide that ties up the loose ends of the film.

Without going into a detailed analysis of the Busby Berkeley finale, I will just note how it integrates some of the elements introduced in the film. First, there is a resolution of the popular and the classical, represented by the elegant black grand piano on which the curtain rises.



This gives way to the "pop" white pianos and Powell's tap dancing. Second, the finale traces rhythm to its African origins; here Black cultural forms assume a popular, colonized disguise. As signified by dark projections, Black rhythms connote a racist "spooky" effect, rather than rhythmic eroticism. The projections are actually shadows cast against the back stage wall by orchestra members

representing the instrumental sounds which carry "that rhythm." These shadows "answer" the images of the Berry brothers, whose silhouettes loom large on the stage curtains. In turn, these Black tap connotations are passed along to Powell, whose tapping feet are seen over the top of the sheet music for "Fascinating Rhythm," a visual refrain of the popular music sales and irresistible rhythm elements.



The finale cuts to the courtroom scene with Dixie explaining to the judge why she wants a divorce; this reveals that the entire film has been in flashback. In the courtroom present, the story of Dixie and Eddie's collaboration and the immense popularity of their efforts then stands as evidence to the judge. He refuses Dixie the divorce and proclaims they should remain married. Because the film makes an analogy between the hit tune's unification of popular and classical and Dixie and Eddie's marriage, each "match" provides evidence for the validity of the other.[54] The love between man and woman is proof of the success of the song and the success of the song "Lady Be Good" proves the rightness of their marriage.

For Marxists, one of the lures of semiotic studies has been the hope of understanding the way ideology is built at the level of daily life, from the bedrock of social knowledge up. Eco's theory promises a systematic approach to "... everything which can be used in order to lie." This is to say that Eco looks at how this bedrock of social wisdom is laid.[52] Some of this potential for seeing how the ideological is structured into culture comes from Eco's theory of code-switching. Here he shows how signs accumulate new equivalences and these come to have the status of "truth."[53]

My study has looked at how a musical film has made rhythm interchangeable with success. Certainly the rhythm = success equation has not been proposed for the first time in this film; it "rings true" from our cultural experience. The idea that "feeling like a million dollars" describes the best state of things gets a "boost" from popular wisdom about money, success, and the inexplicable drive leading to accomplishment. Strangely, "rhythm" in this film's finale is both active and fixating, an impetus for achievement ("You got me on the go ...") and a mesmeric fascination ("You can get it from the slap of the big strong bass/Or the moan of the saxophone"). Characteristic of ideology, such "truths" restated in film are limited and contradictory. Surely they cannot account for very much if we try to use them to make sense of the world.

The notion of cultural coding as it has evolved in mass culture studies still provides only an imprecise critical tool. Because we need to establish general operational communicational rules applying to such various systems, we may sometimes force similarities between systems.[54] Some systems — for example, rituals such as play — are so very loosely coded that to consider them linguistically, we must stretch a comparison with verbal language, which is so strictly coded. Another critic has complained that the titles assigned the various systems seem arbitrary.[55] For example, Eco himself has this problem in his references to codes of perception and codes of recognition. Further, because the difference between an iconic sign and an iconic seme is relative, an important distinction is left as an open-ended choice when it comes to applying the principle to a specific example. Finally, the relation between the iconic and the kinesic has not, in my opinion, been adequately theorized, especially as this pertains to images of the human body represented in cinema, an art ruled by both iconic and kinesic codes. The notion of code is most useful as an orientation. It forces us to see how existing knowledge is used to build new semantic systems (or languages) which construct "realities" parallel to a real world, and how in this adjacent "reality" we can "say" anything, even that dogs do "dance."

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Notes

1. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 174. [return to page 1]

2. Eco, p. 8.

3. Eco, p. 72.

4. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (1957); rpt. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 16. Saussure here first suggested a general semiology, of which linguistics would be a branch.

5. The graphic conventions I am using are based on those Eco has used in *A Theory of Semiotics*. To make a point that images, gestures, and objects are signs and that I must use words as signs to refer to these, I have set off these special signs with slant lines //. Thus, /dog/ is meant to designate the image rather than the word dog. Connotation and denotation, or that content which is signified, is set off by arrows <>. For instance, /leg/ is a sign connoting <hurdle>. Codes or systems are set off with brackets {} instead of quotation marks, hence the {tap dance} code. Double quotation marks are reserved for emphasis and quotation.

6. Stuart Hall, in "Encoding and Decoding the Television Discourse," *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Occasional Paper*, 1973, p. 2, describes transmission and reception as a complete circuit because received messages are translated into social systems which then become sources. Reprinted in *Culture, Media, Language*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

7. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer publicity copy for *Lady Be Good*, Arthur Freed Collection (University of Southern California Special Collections).

8. Eco, p. 141.

9. Eco, p. 275.

10. Eco, p. 274.

11. Eco, p. 16; Saussure, p. 113. [return to page 2]

12. Eco, p. 72.

13. Eco, pp. 268-275.

14. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics,* p. 56; Umberto Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code," in Bill Nichols, ed., *Movies and Methods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p.,596.

15. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 274.

16. Marshall and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 281.

17. Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code," p. 592.

18. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics,* p. 193

19. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 193.

20. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 191.

21. Richard Dyer, *Stars: A Study Guide* (London: The British Film Institute, 1979), p. 7.

22. John Kobal, "I Would Rather Dance than Eat!" interview with Eleanor Powell, *Focus on Film* No. 19 (Autumn, 1974), p. 23.

23. Fred Astaire, *Steps in Time* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), quoted in Stearns, p. 224.

24. For an idea of the scope and complexity of social typage see Orrin E. Klapp, *Heroes, Villains, and Fools* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962).

25. See Roland Barthes, "The Realistic Effect," *Film Reade*r 3 (February, 1978), for a discussion of the way detail signifies "reality" in literature (p. 134).

26. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) theorize this more fully as "collective sedimentation" (p. 39).

27. Hugh Fordin, *The World of Entertainment* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 43.

28. These rediscoveries range from Molly Haskell's cautious suggestion that Garbo, Dietrich, Powell, and Hepburn "strayed" from heterosexuality but returned to it in *From Reverence to Rape* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), p. 132; to Janet Meyers' identification of the sexually "inscrutable" stars as certainly lesbian, quoted in Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979), p. 67; and the "Introduction to the Lesbian Special Section" (*Jump Cut* Nos. 24/25, March, 1981), p. 18, by Edith Becker, Michelle Citron, Julia Lesage, and B. Ruby Rich, which acknowledges "viewing strategies" which find the lesbian subtext in some of the classic star performances.

29. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 310.

30. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, pp. 275-276.

31. Ray L. Birdwhistell, *Kinesics and Context* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), p. 42. Birdwhistell's "rule of thumb" is that the more similar (unimorphic) the male and female of a species, the more necessary the gender display. Humans, although they are dimorphic (having both a male and a female form), rather than unimorphic, are, relative to other species, not strongly marked as different by secondary sex characteristics.

32. Birdwhistell, p. 46.

33. Dennis Giles in "Showmaking," *Movie* No. 24 (Spring, 1977), pp. 17-18, quotes a lecture by Paddy Whannel in which Whannel describes Fred Astaire's dance style as "seduction and initiation of the female partner."

34. Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code," p. 592.

35. Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code," p. 600.

36. Birdwhistell, p. 113.

37. The idea that gesture is innate rather than learned has had particular tenacity because Charles Darwin espoused the instinctual explanation. See, for example, Charles Darwin, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1887, rpt. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979).

38. Birdwhistell, p. 193.

39. Birdwhistell, p. 197.

40. Stearns, p. 140.

41. Eco, "Articulations of the Cinematic Code," p. 602.

42. Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," *Movie*, No. 24 (Spring 1977), p. 3. Reprinted in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).

43. Richard Dyer, *The Musical*, Study Unit No. 16 (London: British Film Institute Education Advisory Service, 1975), pp. 18-19.

44. Dyer, *The Musical*, p. 19.

45. Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," p. 3. Dyer makes the case for the cultural basis of feeling as seen in the relationship between tonal structures and the range of emotions endemic to every society.

46. Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," p. 3.

47. Dyer, *The Musical*, p. 19.

48. Fordin, p. 41.

49. Michael Wood, "When the Music Stopped," *The Columbia Forum*, 1972, reprinted in Dyer, The Musical, p. 25.

50. Kobal, p. 24.

51. Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 61. Feuer points out that the popular/classical polarization in the film comments on Gershwin's own classical aspirations.

52. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, p. 7.

53. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, pp. 286-298.

54. An example of this is Eco's idea, developed in "Articulations of the Cinematic Code" (originally a paper delivered in 1967) that cinema iconography is triply articulated into figures, iconic signs, and iconic semes. This paralleled Birdwhistell's kine and kinemorph, to which Eco added the kinesic figure in this early paper. Later, in *A Theory of Semiotics,* he dismisses the possibility that iconic figures combine to produce iconic signs (p. 215).

55. John Corner, "Codes and Cultural Analysis," *Media, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (January, 1980), p. 81.

JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Lady Be Good — montage in the success sequence

by D. Scott Brewer and Chuck Kleinhans

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The rapid montage sequence depicting and condensing a process of increasing success appears repeatedly in classical Hollywood films. As a recurrent element, it emerges frequently in biography pictures as a transitional device between early years of strife, hardship and preparation, and later years of a fully blossomed achievement. In such sequences we often see the meteoric rise of the athlete, gangster or entertainer moving from apprenticeship to national prominence, from family to the big time. Success montages often appear as elliptical condensations of group projects too. Thus the backstage musical commonly uses one type of success montage in depicting a condensed version of the opening night show and the audience's enthusiastic response.

Because it is such a widely used element of cinema, we were interested in closely examining a particular example — the composition of and rise to the top of the hit parade of the title song in the MGM musical *Lady Be Good* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1941). This sequence offers considerable development, and its length of about five and one-half minutes makes it one of the longest and most substantial success montages that we've seen.

We began studying the sequence on a horizontal editing table, which allowed us to observe the exact construction of the sequence. Some people might raise questions about this method of analysis, pointing out that by being able to examine the sequence frame by frame, we have analyzed it in a totally different way than how it is actually perceived by audiences. True enough. We acknowledge the difference between an analytical reading and an experiential one. But we also want to argue that we are able to describe the film in a way that opens up a more accurate understanding of how the film presents material which is perceived and understood almost instantaneously. In addition, we are able to consider how the sequence was put together, and how the makers of *Lady Be Good* tried to present the intellectual idea of "success" and the abstract concept of mass culture popularity in the concrete form of a rapid succession of images and sounds. We want to present here some results of our more detailed analysis. We do not claim to be exhaustive, but we do feel we have observed the most significant elements of the sequence in terms of what is conveyed and how it is presented.

The sequence can be loosely described in six parts, each of which shows one stage in the progress of song and songwriters: from creation to mass reproduction (printing), sheet music sales, song plugging, record sales, mass popularity, and triumphant success. A complete formal breakdown of the montage revealing all sound and image relations would be very long because of the density of the passage. Here we are presenting the results of our more detailed analysis in a digested format. We have segmented the sequence by major actions that convey a single concept or a related

cluster of concepts.

To set the scene: Composer Eddie Crane (Robert Young) and lyricist Dixie Donegan (Ann Sothern) have gradually become a successful popular songwriting team and also a married couple. They split up professionally and personally, but neither is successful or happy without the partnership. At the point the success sequence appears, about two-thirds of the way into the film, Eddie tries to make up with Dixie. He tries out a new tune on her and she begins to supply lyrics. Thus the song "Lady Be Good" is born. (We will not deal here with the "artistic creation" sequences in *Lady Be Good*. Suffice it to say this is the third time in the film Dixie and Eddie "spontaneously" compose together.)

We are starting the success sequence with Eddie's playing of the completed song. Throughout the next five minutes and 21 seconds the song continues, changing in arrangement, tempo, orchestration and vocals. It ends with Eddie and Dixie at a banquet in their honor given by other songwriters and music publishers. In addition to showing their success via "Lady Be Good," the sequence reestablishes their working relationship and brings their personal lives together.

Presentation of images moves from *Connotation* (in italics) to shot number to time segment within the montage (shot number: minute.second) to image content summarized.

Part one: from creation to mass reproduction

Connotations of working (artist and technician).



1: 0.00 Eddie starts playing the completed song; he hesitates at "misunderstood." They look at each other. Their separation has been a "misunderstanding." The glance unites them professionally and personally.



2: 0.22 In their publisher's office with Max (publisher) and Red (song plugger). Everyone beams. Max reaches for his cigar several times but is taken up with the music and stops the gesture. The song overwhelms automatic behavior; enchantment



3: 0.38 Shifting glances; all look at Max who says, "We've got a hit on our hands." Handshakes. People in the music business "know" the commercial future of a song on hearing it. Once created the hit is recognized for what it is, not made into a hit.



4: 0.46 Max: "Get me an arranger." Music: violins connote speed, acceleration. A symbolic moment; next we see a door with the word "arranger" on it. The montage builds on generalization not specificity.
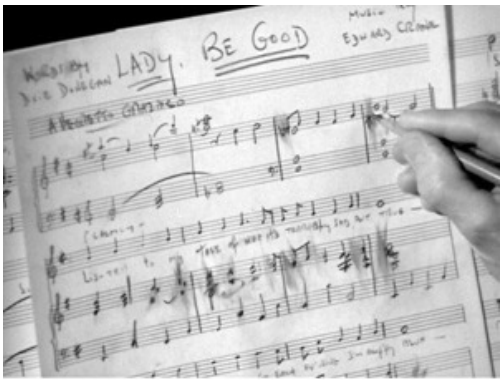


5: 0.49 Door: "Arranger." Iris out: hands on piano.
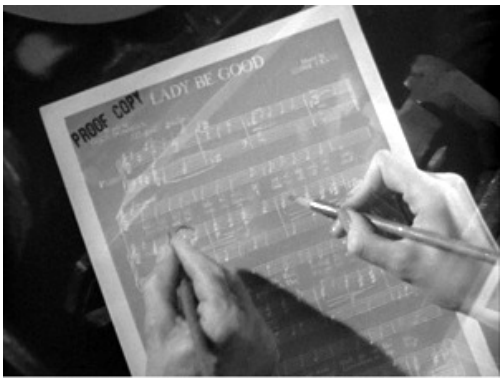


6: 0.54 Eddie and older man; smoking, shirtsleeves, trying major chord then minor chord then major chord.

Connotations of work.



7: 1.00 CU of handwritten song and hands; erasures, changes.



8: 1.07 Superimposition from 1.03 to 1.11; printing press, (stock footage) pulling a proof copy, correcting a proof copy by hand, a large press.

The sequence moves from *creation to mass reproduction. Sheet music is the initial and basic form a hit takes*.



9 1.12 (left) Superimposition: printing press and "Lady Be Good" sheet music stacking up (pixillation).

Part two: sheet music sales

In many ways the next segment *conveys spontaneity as the sheet music increases in sales*. The segment details sheet music sales, building in a pattern of threes (two could be coincidence; three establishes a pattern). We see a piano playing "Lady Be Good" in a retail store, then "sales," and then a display case and money.

Declared a hit before public acceptance (self-fulfilling prophecy).



10: 1.15 (left) CU sheet music cover and "New Hit" sign.

Connotations of eagerness.



11: 1.19 (left) Retail store. Matronly pianist playing stride piano style. Background: young people buying sheet music.

A number of changes take place when we see other retail stores: the pianist becomes *more fashionable, the buyers older and more numerous (younger people are tastemakers, trendsetters)*, more sales people appear.

"Serious" music instruments are the background for sheet music passing from retail clerk to consumers.



12: 1.22 (left) Display case with violin, horn, flute. Sheet music passed across counter, waiting hands. No money is exchanged.

The fact of increased sales is shown. Why and how this happened is not shown.



13: 1.25 Another store with a "Lady Be Good" wall display in the back, pianist, more people, more women customers, two women selling.



14: 1.31 Sheet music on display case without explanation disappears off the case. Superimposition of coins falling downward in the frame.



15: 1.32 Sheet music all disappears. Coins fall in superimposition and pile up in the same plane as the top of the display case.

The process of exchange, the circulation of commodities, is shown by the juxtaposition of two things: sheet music disappears and coins begin piling up. Although actual exchange of goods and money is not shown, retail trade is not accurately depicted, some kind of a relation is established. Sheet music goes to "the

public" (not really customers or consumers in the economic sense), and money arrives and increases.

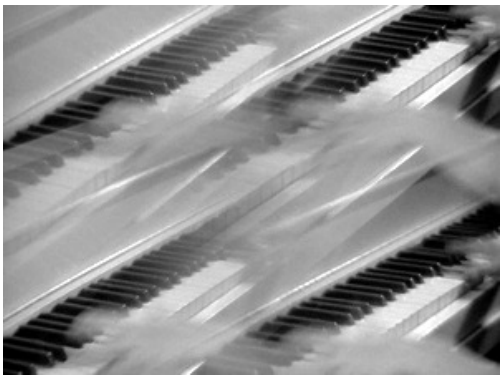
Increase in numbers implies success. The success of the song links Eddie and Dixie in love and as public figures, celebrities.



16: 1.35 Third store. Two pianists, customers crowding the counter, in the background a display with Eddie and Dixie's picture in a heart and the words "Big Hit."



17: 1.38 Repetition of segment 14. Sheet music vanishes while money descends.



18: 1.43 Optical multiplication of hands playing piano; tempo of music increases.

The sheet music echoes the coins falling earlier, to some extent equating the two.



19: 1.50 (left) Exterior, store display window with crowd looking in. "Sensational Hit." Pages of sheet music fall downward in the frame in superimposition. At first we thought paper money was falling in superimposition, but it was sheet music.

Sheet music sales appear to be a spontaneous activity — self generated and self propelled. Any rationality, order, decision making, planning, etc. in business is erased. The concept of "retail sales" disappears too. Instead, merchandise vanishes and money appears.



20: 1.54 (left) Repetition of display case and disappearing sheet music with superimposition of a curtain of sheet music covers which rises. The segment depicting sheet music sales ends by continuing the "magical disappearance of sheet music.

Part three: song plugging

The job often had associations of crassness, aggressive selling, and sometimes "deals," favors, payola, etc.

The next segment uses a pattern of three to show song plugging. The job of the song plugger was to persuade performers to use new songs. Such performance stimulated sheet music sales. At the time, the song plugger was important in producing an initial momentum for the "hit."

Aggressive selling vs. indifference or disinterest.



21: 1.55 (left) Red (Red Skelton) the song plugger in the offices of a distinguished older man makes extreme gestures of playing a violin while making nasal "violin" sound.

"LBG" reaches the audience for Boston Pops type performance.



22: 2.01 (left) Man is shown as a conductor of an orchestra playing "Lady Be Good."

A simple transition device that reinforces the idea of performance affecting sheet music sales.



23: 2.07 (left) Curtain of sheet music moves up; copies of LBG sheet music fall down through the frame.

Commonplace racist stereotyping: the musicians seem unimpressed.



24: 2.09 (left) Red in a Chinese restaurant or club sings the song to some men in a mixture of pidgin English and "mispronounced" sing-song rhythm (with exaggerated gestures).

A gag, but is the joke on them or on Red? (and us?)



25 2.14 (left) Same men in costume and with instruments. Singer sings in a foreign language — no apparent relation to the English version in music or vocals.

Sales are connoted.



26 2.20 (left) Repeat of the sheet music curtain motif.

The strong implication that the particularly open mercenary activity of song plugging has no effect. A hit is not really sold, it is recognized.





27: 2.24 Red doing a pigeon-toed dance for the Berry Brothers (a stage dance trio who appeared earlier in the film) We are backstage with the Berry Brothers on and around large trunks and a Venus de Milo (*connotation — odd prop?*) As with the others Red songplugs, they seem disinterested. But in each case the song is used in performance.

28: 2.33 Red falls (*ineptness*).





29: 2.33 Berry Brother falls ...

... (*skilled dance split*).

The headline is inordinately large, which makes it easy to read, but which also grants the song a great importance. The song is now known by one word — Lady — which is the mark of success and fame (e.g., Ike, Prince, Barbra, Ali, etc.)



30: 2.41 (left) Transition. Sheet music covers superimposed with *Variety*.

31: 2.42 *Variety* headline: "Lady" Promising.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Part four: record sales

The scene is devised to connote "recording," not to actually describe the act.



32: 2.46 Superimposition. Sheet music curtain rises. Recording studio engineer twists knobs.

33: Recording studio, musicians.



34: Crooner friend of Dixie and Eddie — Buddy — making a record version of "LBG." Again, a very abstract and unrealistic scene — Buddy in a tux, one mike, musicians seen do not match instruments heard on soundtrack, etc.

Technical work; association with RCA Victor dog trademark; wishing for good luck.



35: 3.07 Eddie and Dixie watch the master record being cut ...



... with their fox terrier, Buttons. Dixie blows a kiss to the machine.

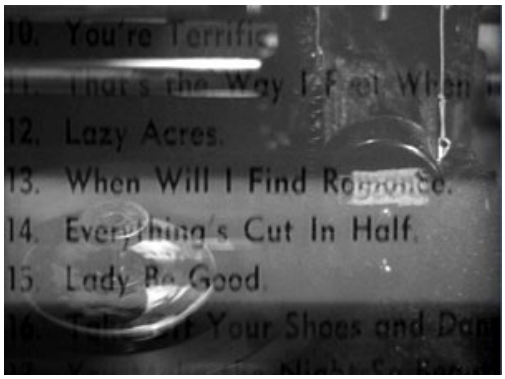




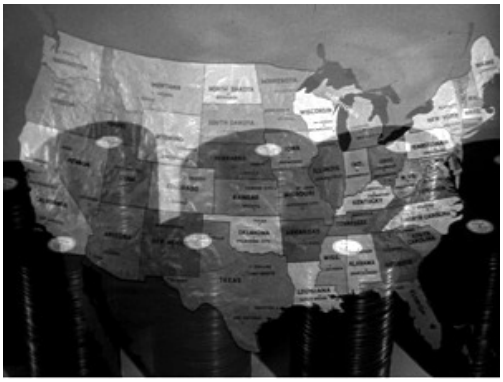
36: 3.16 Buttons and machine.

37: 3.20 Superimposition. CU of record being cut and completed records spinning upward. A rather dense set of superimpositions follows showing records being cut, records stacking up, records rolling.

Increase, multiplication, acceleration are used here, as earlier, to suggest quantitative success.







38: 3.27 *Variety* "Best Song Sellers" list appears; LBG is No. 15.

39: 3.30 New headline appears as record machine disappears.

40: 3.32 Superimposition continues: "'Lady' Sweeps Nation"; map of USA; large ocean waves. The montage becomes extremely literal (wave/ sweeps, map/nation).

41: 3.36 Superimposition, stacks of records grow upward.

Another pattern of three commences as record and performance are combined in three geographic areas.



42: 3.41 (left) Camera moves in on California while superimposed records pass by.







Superimposition. Alabama on map;

43: 3.43 Lifeguard sings LBG to young women in swim suits. Another gag. ...

... Camera cranes up and back to reveal them under a beach umbrella in heavy rain.

records pass through frame.





46: 3.56 Interior of Black club. ...

... Musicians, woman dancing in foreground.



47: 4.01 Map and moving records. New York.

48: 4.03 Iris out. Bandleader in night club cues spotlight to travel.

Success in public recognition (in this case in cafe society). The success of LBG has brought them together in public places and in the public eye. Material success produces personal recognition.







49: 4.04 As LBG is played, Dixie and Eddie are discovered by the spot at a table; the room applauds them.

50: 4.14 *Variety*: "Lady Makes Good."

51: 4.15 LBG is now 11 in *Variety* chart.

Validation by the authoritative newspaper on entertainment.

Part five: mass popularity

Another pattern of three commences as LBG climbs the chart: ordinary people begin singing the song in everyday situations and change the words, making it their own. Mass culture becomes validated as folk culture.



52: 4.16 Window washer sings LBG to a delighted Dixie. He is Italian (accent, cap, bandana, broad gestures) and changes the song lyrics to "bambina." At 4.20, LBG goes to 10, 9, on chart.



53: 4.24 Rag popping Black shoeshiner sings LBG substituting "hot potato" for "sweet and lovely."



54: 4.27 Camera tilts up to Eddie having his shoes shined and smiling. At 4.28, LBG moves up 8, 7, 6, 5.



55: 4.28 Manicurist sings LBG changing words to "dark and handsome."



56: 4.31 Camera movement reveals Dixie having her nails done. LBG goes to the top of the chart.

This sequence implies that a successful song goes all the way to the top when ordinary people take it up and make it their own. The hit parade is a measure of popular opinion, consciousness, activity. Interestingly enough, the previous indicators of commercial exchange are missing now. Although the chart indicates record sales, by being parallel cut with plain folks singing the song, it seems that it is more of a popularity poll. As people sing the song (not as they buy the records) it becomes number one.

Part six: peer recognition and triumphant success

After the two have achieved great success, peers give recognition.

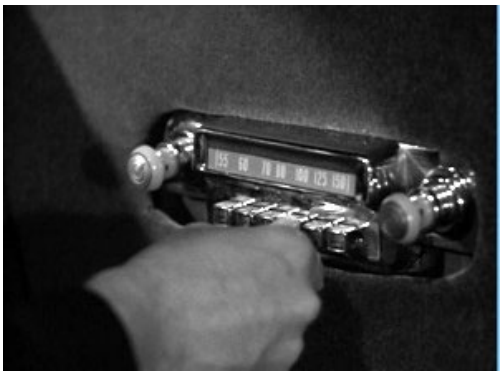
57: 4.38 (left) *Variety* announces banquet for Eddie and Dixie.



First depiction of the radio in the sequence.



58: 4.41 Iris out. In a cab dressed up for the banquet, Eddie and Dixie seem extremely happy.



59: 4.46 Eddie turns on the vehicle's radio



60: 4.47 He mimes the Lucky Strike tobacco auctioneer calling on the *Hit Parade* Program.

61: 4.49 Their song is again number one, for the 10th week.

62: 4.56 They feign boredom with success.

Radio seems to be the last medium for songs to catch up with the popularity of LBG: it responds to the groundswell of public activity (rather than itself shaping taste and purchases). In this segment the highest success combines (1) maximum quantitative success (record sales per week) with (2) public recognition by one's peers (the banquet).



63: 5.07 Eddie and Dixie exit from the



... The camera tilts up to a sign on the



64: 5.21 Dissolve through sign to Banquet

cab. A brass band is playing LBG, flash bulbs go off (the press, news), many bystanders are held back by police (glamour, celebrity, etc.) ...

Hotel Whitney-Paige (WASP ethnicity) announcing a Testimonial Dinner.

with Max presiding. Song LBG down, applause of people at the banquet up.

After seeing the sequence, if we ask the question, "How does a song become a hit?" we find that it all seems to happen spontaneously. When created, a song either is a hit or it is not. After that, all that's needed is the exposure so that everyone (the publisher, the performers, the record companies, the public, radio) can share in that recognition of the hit's essence. This is, of course, a distortion of how the music industry actually operated in 1941. In fact, it is so much of a distortion as to be completely fantastic and imaginary. We can see how the very simplified form of the Hollywood montage with its continual use of stereotypes, of univocal conventions, of simplified symbolism, meshes very well with producing a vastly simplified and simplistic understanding of the processes of mass culture.

We know that many techniques and examples of montage were brought to Hollywood in the Thirties by Slavko Vorkapich who had studied with Eisenstein and other Soviet filmmakers. Vorkapich worked on a number of montage sequences and gained such fame for them in Hollywood that "Vorkapich" became a slang term in the industry for any montage sequence. Unfortunately, we've been unable to find out very much about how such sequences were handled in Hollywood. Some studios had separate units just for such sequences, and young directors often started there, as did Don Siegel, for example. But there seems to be no article that discusses what specific methods were developed for the Hollywood montage and what the people making them thought about montage and how they compared their work with that of the Soviet filmmakers.

Other questions also come up. For example, how does rapid montage work? How do audiences understand it? How much information and what kind of visual and sound information can be conveyed? The answers to such questions may well come from work in perception and cognition and from studying the work of avant-garde filmmakers who have worked extensively with rapid montage. Short of launching such a full-scale investigation, it seems fair to say that in *Lady Be Good* we have a very watered-down version of montage, if we take Eisenstein as our standard reference point. In the hands of Arthur Freed's MGM musical unit, intellectual montage became what we would call "lobotomizd montage."

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Lady Be Good— ideology in the success sequence

by Chuck Kleinhans

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> "A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties."
> — Karl Marx, *Capital*

The success sequence in *Lady Be Good* shows the song "Lady Be Good" from its creation to its becoming the nation's top song hit. At first glance, the process appears quite simple and straightforward. A song is produced in artistic collaboration, published as sheet music and performed live by various talents. As popularity grows, records are made which stimulate further performances. Finally, radio follows popular opinion and validates the song as number one on the *Hit Parade*. The process presented is extremely ideological: in a general sense operating within the arena of bourgeois ideology, and in a specific sense promoting one particular set of explanations of capitalist mass culture activity. I want to develop a Marxist analysis of this phenomenon by examining three areas: the situation of the music industry in 1941, the nature and function of the hit parade, and the concept of success.



At the ASCAP banquet, Max their song publisher announces that their (commercial) success must be honored with this ceremony.

Since *Lady Be Good* is set partially within the music industry in 1941 (figuratively in the film's narrative and literally in that both the film and music businesses often overlap within the culture industry), let's consider the historical situation of popular music at the time. An investigation reveals that the actual conditions of music production were different from what the film shows. In the late 30s, the older pattern of Tin Pan Alley songwriting and publication, which focused on sheet music sales and live performance and embodied here in Dixie and Eddie, was forced to change in response to the growth of newer capitalist media such as records and broadcast radio. With the advent of sound film, another factor was introduced that changed the situation further.

> "Hit hard, first by records then by radio, Tin Pan Alley was tottering. Hollywood now stepped in and took over many publishers. Warner had the cream. Their Music Publisher's Holding Corporation held the copyrights to most of the songs of Victor Herbert, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Noel Coward, George Gershwin, Sigmund Romberg, and Rodgers and Hart. As a result, Warner Bros. controlled a majority of ASCAP's governing board. Together with the publishing companies of the other major studios Hollywood owned the bulk of America's — the world's — popular music. Thus, when radio defied ASCAP In 1939, it was really defying Hollywood."[1] [open notes in new window]

In 1939 the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) formed Broadcast Music Incorporated (BMI) to challenge ASCAP, which was essentially a monopoly guild of songwriters and publishers. The showdown came when ASCAP announced its 1941 rates for radio broadcast — up 100%. Radio refused to pay the increase, and for ten months no ASCAP songs were played on U.S. radio. Instead the broadcast industry used out-of-copyright works such as those by Stephen Foster and by the newer (and formerly regional) talents of Black and country and western songwriters, now enrolled in BMI. After about ten months ASCAP settled with radio, on radio's terms.

With this brief sketch as background, some facts about *Lady Be Good* become quite interesting. The film's producer, Arthur Freed, was a top ASCAP money maker at the time. He came west from New York with the introduction of sound, wrote numerous songs for MGM musicals in the thirties, and had considerable revenue from the subsequent sheet music sales and performance licensing of his movie hits. An ASCAP activist, he was honored with a banquet by the organization in the late 30s and participated in ASCAP concerts in 1940, which were intended to build public sentiment for ASCAP in the upcoming battle with the NAB and BMI. At about the same time, Freed bought *Lady, Be Good* from Warner's for $61,500. (It had been a 1924 Gershwin Broadway musical with Fred and Adele Astaire. Freed kept the title, the title song, and "Fascinatin' Rhythm," and discarded the original book.) Production began February 24, 1941, and Norman McLeod brought the film in on time April 13, though Busby Berkeley's dance sequences were not completed until early May. The film was released September 12. In other words, the film was shot and released during radio's fight with ASCAP and (indirectly) Hollywood.

What are we to make of this information? I believe that if we have it in mind when looking at the success sequence, we can see that the film chooses a very particular side, the ASCAP side, in a fight between different groups of capitalists. In large part, the sequence is organized as and functions as fairly direct propaganda. At the same time, I must admit that I'm a little uneasy about having discovered this clear connection between a specific economic struggle within capitalism and a sequence in a Hollywood entertainment film. Isn't this getting close to the kind of

Vulgar Marxist interpretation that all Marxist critics are supposed to scorn, ridicule, and denounce whenever possible?



Delivering the only overt political message of the film, Dixie sings a new song at the banquet, "The Last Time I Saw Paris," with the superimposition of her singing face over stock shots of the French capital. At the time of the film's release in September 1941, German troops had been occupying the city for over a year. Thus the melancholy song about remembering Paris was understood as referring to the city before the wartime invasion. Thus it was a subtle anti-fascist statement at a time when the US was still neutral regarding the war in Europe.

But we must remember that however much we might want to avoid conspiracy theories of ideology in mass culture, in point of fact, there are times when capitalists use the mass media to directly promote their immediate interests. Hollywood's contemporaneous take on World War II provides one example. To stress the relative autonomy of the cultural superstructure still leaves the analyst with responsibility for considering the actual relations.

By considering a different aspect of the success sequence, I may be able to make my analysis more sophisticated. Specifically, the sequence's use of Variety's best selling songs and the *Hit Parade* radio program is interesting in light of work done on the Top Ten by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Sartre's interest in examining the Top Ten song hits in the book is part of his analysis of ideology and social organization in contemporary capitalist society. He develops a special vocabulary and set of philosophic concepts; I will somewhat simplify his argument.

Sartre begins by explaining that the *Hit Parade* program in the postwar period had the effect of increasing sales 30% to 50%. A song that made the top ten greatly boosted its sales after being heard on the Saturday night program. In effect, this phenomenon perpetuates the previous week's selections and defines future action for the consumer. If you buy a top ten record after hearing the *Hit Parade*, it is because it has been singled out by an Other. Of course in terms of individual purchasers, people do like what they buy. But to actually prefer the record bought, one would first have to have heard all the other new records.

What we have then is the action of a small group (previous buyers of the record, last week's consumers) extended in time and distance and influencing the present. The propagation of the top selling record list allows individuals to become aware of what they have done as individuals in terms of economic exchange, and also it

allows them to become aware of their existence within a pattern of exchange in general. A certain abstraction takes place. The name of the song is connected with its individual quality and this in turn connected with the performers. Thus one hears and buy the "new Stones" or the "new Madonna." Figures for previous sales are transformed into value rankings — quantity becomes quality. A hierarchy of values builds, based on quantitative relations between sales figures, and objective (mathematical) ranking becomes a unified system of values. Everyone then sees the system of values as the expression of collective choice.

This is, Sartre points out, a fine example of alienation appearing as freedom. By purchasing the Top Ten, you do not end up with your own preferred music, with a collection that is based on personal aesthetic judgment, but rather you end up with the record collection of no one, the records of the Other. (An experience I'm sure we've all had when we eagerly bought a hot new record and later found we never played it after an initial listening trial.)

We see this process at work in the success sequence, or perhaps I should say we can see this process if we choose to understand the sequence in terms external to the sequence itself. Most obviously this reading is reinforced if we connect the rise of the song "Lady Be Good" with the success of Eddie and Dixie. The thinly-disguised ASCAP banquet that concludes the sequence provides the honor, recognition and acclaim that seems to belong "naturally" with the song's becoming number one in the country. Indeed, in the banquet scene Max says that the immense popular success (i.e., sales) demands that ASCAP honor its creators. Commercial success breeds personal success — a basic element of bourgeois ideology. Thus the film presents, re-presents, the dominant ideology on the level of dramatic narrative, on the level of montage technique, and on the level of explicit character speech.

If we look at success as a general concept developed, elaborated, and made concrete in the success sequence, we find that it can be readily understood. Success joins two things: money and public acclaim. This much is very clear in the sequence. But what is not made clear is how this success can be achieved; the mechanism of success remains a mystery in the film. The film does not show how the system of hit songs operates; it does not produce accurate knowledge about the mass culture industry. But asking for that kind of information and analysis means asking for a radical film, for a Marxist film. One of the most obvious conclusions that can be drawn from the success sequence, and from the film as a whole, is that success is not the result of the rationality, planning, understanding and calculated action usually associated with commercial enterprise. Rather, success is always linked to spontaneity, to accident, to luck. It just happens and no one knows why. Some songs are hits and others aren't. In short, the pop music system operates spontaneously, magically, and mysteriously. In this way too, the film is ideological, conforming to an imaginary concept of capitalism.

Lady Be Good rests within the hegemony of bourgeois ideology in many ways. But to get beyond an ideological understanding of success, of the hit parade, or of *Lady Be Good* as an example of mass culture, we must go beyond the film itself. We must understand it existing within history, within society, and within ideology. As Marx argued, a commodity is a mysterious thing. A mass culture commodity, a specific film, can seem especially so, but it is possible to solve the mystery.

Notes

1. Ian Whitcomb, *After the Ball: Pop Music from Rag to Rock* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972), p. 119. [return to text]



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JUMP CUT
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Opening credits of the film *Bobby Jasoos*. Bilkis Ahmed is shown in a spying mood. She's the only lady detective in her locality.

Breaking the glass ceiling: women detectives in the Bombay-based fictional film *Bobby Jasoos* and in the British fictional TV series *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*

by Sonika Jain

In English literature, the crime story, "far from being a somewhat sleazy black-sheep cousin belatedly admitted to the house of fiction by a side door [...] has some claim to have driven the main structural transformations of narrative for (at least) the last half-century" (Priestman, 2003, p. 6). The film entitled *Bobby Jasoos* and the English novels and TV series entitled *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* raise the status of crime genre to a sophisticated member of the house of fiction.



Opening credits of the TV series, *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*. Mma Precious Ramotswe with a cup of tea in her hand in her office, the visual sequence is interlaced with traditional Botswana music. She proudly points towards Botswana on the map of African continent. Her office is situated at the Kgale Hill marketplace, which overlooks the busy and modern city of Gaborone.



Both the narratives are contemporary interpretation of detective fiction, a sub-genre of crime fiction. *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* share less with other sub-genres of crime fiction namely, "the non-investigative crime novel (centered on transgressors or victims) and the 'mixed' form of the police procedural" (Horsley, 2005, p. vi). Both the narratives are informed by the classic[1] (1880s onwards) and the hard-boiled [2] (1920s onwards) strands of detective fiction [open endnotes in new window] but they also reimagine the

Charminar area, the older and over-populated part of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, is where *Bobby Jasoos* is filmed.



Bobby keeps revisiting this place during the film to find perspective. Overlooking the grand Charminar, Bobby prays during Ramadan for her simple wish—to become a well-respected female detective of Moghulpura.



A traditional Mokoro (boat) ride in shallow water of Okavango Delta with an expansive spread of water lily flowers in Botswana's countryside.



In *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, as a child, Precious spent time with her father boating in the Delta floodwaters, learning to love her country and all the living beings who live there.

traditional boundaries in refreshing ways. The genre of detective fiction is not a fixed terminology as it has undergone constant innovations whilst somewhat holding on to a widely understood set of conventions of a satisfying mystery story. Thus the genre is reconfigured with the "shifting socio-political [economic] circumstances and the dominant anxieties and preoccupations of different periods" (Horsley, 2005, p. 5). *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* are rooted in a specific geography and cultural landscape.

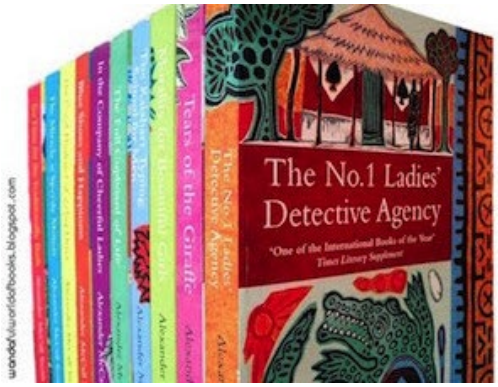
- *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (Anthony Minghella, 2008-9) [3] is set in Gaborone, the capital city of Botswana, which is barely known to the outside world in comparison to its Southern neighbor, Johannesburg, capital of South Africa. *Bobby Jasoos* (*Jasoos* translates as *detective* in English) is situated in the *de jure* capital city of Andhra Pradesh, in the narrow and twisting lanes of an older and economically underdeveloped part of Hyderabad, a space which is not a preferred location for most Bollywood productions.
- The film *Bobby Jasoos* (Samar Shaikh, 2014) is driven by the desire of a female protagonist, Bilkis Ahmed better known as Bobby (nickname), to become the number one detective in Moghulpura, an over-populated area of Hyderabad which houses the famous historical monument *Charminar* (translates as 4 towers in English). Detective Mma Precious Ramotswe is the protagonist of the TV series and the only private eye in her country, who runs the company, *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.

Bobby Jasoos and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* are character driven stories where the characters are rooted in their complex milieu and converse in the colloquial language. The characters interact with the space and in turn it shapes their identities. Thus landscape becomes an important character of the story especially in *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.

- Bilkis Ahmed, 30 years, is the oldest of three siblings (3 girls), and much to her father's dismay has not shown any interest in marriage.[4]
- In the novels, Mma Precious Ramotswe started her sleuthing business when she was in her 20s from the inheritance left by her father. She has no surviving parents and was bought up as the only child in Botswana's beautiful rural countryside by her wise father. In the TV series, Precious Ramotswe seems to be in her mid 30s, a single woman with an abusive marriage behind her.
- The BBC TV series is an adaptation of Rhodesian-born Scottish writer Alexander McCall Smith's internationally best-selling series of the same name.[5] *Bobby Jasoos* is scripted by Sanyukta Shaikh Chawla and one of the publicly known influences of the character of *Bobby Jasoos* is the real-life lady detectives.

My essay will explore the broader contexts and specific undercurrents which shape the narratives of *Bobby Jasoos*, a Bollywood film, 122 minutes (approx.) and the British TV series *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, 6 episodes of 60 minutes each. While *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* could not be made beyond 6 episodes and *Bobby Jasoos* was unsuccessful at the box office yet their contribution to story-telling cannot be either neglected or undermined.

While two continents of Asia and Africa separate these stories yet they echo more than they diverge from each other, as will become clear in the essay. The central characters share in common a sense of respect for cherished human values, belong to humble backgrounds, love their land and know their people. They are determined to be successful in their unconventional professions and personal lives despite the pressures and challenges they face. They resist the 'inherent maleness' of the profession and the detective genre in which detection would



Colorful covers (depicting African visual art) of book series, *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, written by Rhodesian-born Scottish writer Alexander McCall Smith.



At the launch of the film *Bobby Jasoos*, lead actress Vidya Balan (enacting Bilkis Ahmed) and producer Dia Mirza pose with real life women detectives who inspired the actress and scriptwriter Sanyukta Shaikh Chawla.

seem an 'unsuitable job for a woman' (Horsley, 2005, pp. 245-246).

Historical legacy of women detectives

> "Until quite recently, the story of the development of crime fiction writing was most commonly told as a movement from man to man, beginning with Edgar Allan Poe, then Arthur Conan Doyle, followed by Dashiell Hammett and so on" (Reddy, 2003, p. 191).

Female detectives Bilkis Ahmed and Precious Ramotswe function in times that are very different from the early period of detective fiction where writers (male and female) created predominantly male detectives and a few created well-sketched women sleuths. It was commonly held that women, both writers and detectives "appeared, seeming from nowhere, first in the golden age[6] and then again with the rise of feminist crime fiction" (Reddy, 2003, p. 191), coinciding with the feminist movement.

> "[This] distorted and partial history began to undergo revision in the late 1980s [...and] it is now widely acknowledged that the woman writer and the woman detective have as long a history in crime fiction as do their male counterparts" (Reddy, 2003, p.191).

As will be clear in the essay, the female characters Precious Ramotswe and Bilkis Ahmed are a departure from early examples (during the period of 1890s-1950s) of male writers sketching cartoonish roles for female detectives or making them as "nosy spinsters or the helpmates of male detectives" (Reddy, 2003, p.193). [7] While the narratives commence with Precious and Bilkis being single and on the 'wrong side' of the marriageable age, the situation changes as the narratives progress. They are neither cartoonish nor helpmates of the male detectives. As the protagonist, Bilkis assumes cartoonish roles to comment on conventions of the male detective genre and her own inadequacies as an amateur detective.

> "The rise of hardboiled fiction in the 1920s in the United States and its eventual dominance in critical opinion ensured that female detectives would be relegated to the ranks of amateurs and seen as marginal in the development of the crime fiction genre [during that period]" (Reddy, 2003, p. 193).[8]

Precious and Bilkis commence their career as amateurs with no formal training underway but they refine their abilities with each case and by the end of the narratives, they are seasoned professionals. Re-reading of "British writer Agatha Christie's female detective Jane Marple (1920s onwards) shows the richness of the 'nosy spinster' character who left her legacy for later writers." (Reddy,2003, pp. 193-195) It is another research exercise to examine Ms. Marple in relation to Bilkis Ahmed and Precious Ramotswe. But briefly speaking, Jane, Precious and Bilkis share certain traits of a female detective — singlehood, independence, close observation, perceptiveness, solving domestic crimes, and confined sphere of action.[9] The striking difference is that Bilkis and Precious have professional acceptance that Ms. Marple never had—"the police found her to be an old pussy and she never got credit for solving cases" (Reddy, 2003, p. 193)—a reflection of the times in which these characters were developed. Yet, all three of them are strong women detectives in their own right. These narratives should be read as not merely solving of mysterious cases but human interest stories exploring the nuances of human behavior within specific temporal-spatial conditions.

Shared borders with the classical and hard-boiled detective traditions

The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency and *Bobby Jasoos* have in common with the classic detective tradition the fact that the "reader's attention is focused on the process by which a brilliant or at least uncommonly perceptive detective solves a case so intricate and puzzling that ordinary minds are baffled. The detective's solution brings a satisfying sense of completion and closure" (Horsley, 2005, p. 12). The female detectives have keen perception combined with intuition in the sense that they can see, hear and feel in a way that most people, including their male predecessors, wouldn't.



Precious with her client (Mrs. Curtin) from United States. They are visiting an ex-commune site in Botswana's countryside looking for clues to the mystery of the client's missing son. Inside a debilitated shelter (used as a dispensary for rural patients), they find a newspaper clipping, a group photograph that gives a leading clue – it shows the closeness between Mrs. Curtin's son, Michael Curtin and a lady.



With help from an elderly tracker, Precious finds the place in the ex-commune site where Michael Curtin was improperly buried.

In an episode, *The Boy with an African Heart*, Precious visits an ex-commune site with her client, Mrs. Curtin, whose son is missing for years. Precious can sense that there is something in the premises. An elderly tracker leads her to an exact place where the body of Michael Curtin was improperly buried. Detectives take note of evidence consisting of "obvious signs" and combine them with "clues that are over-looked or dismissed as irrelevant by others" (Horsley, 2005, p. 26).



On the outskirts of Gaborone, the cemetery is very significant place not only because Michael Curtin is given an honorable funeral, but also because this is a place where Precious' father and newly born child were buried. It is a place she revisits to find peace and reconnect with her roots.



Client, convinced of her husband's infidelity, accuses Precious of being a husband-stealer—based on a solid proof (photograph taken by Precious) where her husband is kissing Precious.



The hand-painted sign of *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* is defaced by the disgruntled lady client.

In the same place, Precious finds a hand carving on a wooden log, signs of extinguished fire and an old group photograph of the members of the commune. After completing the investigation, she comes to the conclusion that the missing son's wife and child had visited the site and carved the log with his name. She shares with the classic detective the ability to solve cases by combining clues and evidence.

Bilkis and Precious are smart though they are not well-educated in the sense that they have "the sort of true grit and clear-eyed pragmatism that readers of more hard-boiled fare will instantly recognize" (Kevin Burton Smith). In the feature-length pilot episode, a client asks Precious to bring her solid proof that her husband was unfaithful to her. Precious meets the husband in the bar, they go to her house, she pretends to be interested in him while taking pictures of them getting close. She shows the evidence (pictures) to prove her client's suspicion correct. She solves the case successfully with her pragmatism but loses her professional fees by annoying her client. Bilkis and Precious possess capacity for inductive and deductive reasoning which is shared with their classic predecessor such as Sherlock Holmes but they do not seem to have great affinity for science as Holmes.

The inductive part of this procedure involves the "drawing of inferences from observed facts and particulars [that] is a potential cause of indeterminacy" (Horsley, 2005, p. 24). As highly intelligent detectives, Holmes, Ahmed, and Ramotswe have

> "the ability to form a theory rapidly about the way in which facts are connected and to construct a chain of reasoning that leads from this theory to [...] conclusion. It is this deductive process that in the end produces determinate meaning" (Horsley, 2005, p. 24).

Inductive and deductive reasoning is combined all the time—in a case every Friday at 2pm in the hospital ward, an old patient dies. A junior Zimbabwean doctor who is at risk of losing his job approaches Precious to investigate the matter. There are many possibilities for potential cause of the death but Precious and her assistant Grace eliminate all but one. They find out that every Friday at 2pm, the cleaner plugs a vacuum cleaner in the same socket which connects all the wires and machines supporting the old patient. The plugs are disconnected and the patient dies. Precious negotiates in such a way with the senior doctor that the junior doctor and the cleaner are protected in their jobs and newer patients do not die in the same bed for the same reasons—combining compassion with pragmatism.

Precious and Bobby are tenacious, self-reliant and trained to deal with the harshness of life as much as their male counterparts. They can cope with dangerous people and difficult situations such as threat, physical danger and violence that is part and parcel of sleuthing, bringing them in line with their male detectives. However, they are not "tough" in terms of embracing or perpetuating violence. Unlike Precious, Bilkis tends towards the cynical (so-called "tough") attitude towards one's own emotions, which takes an extreme form for the hardboiled detective. Precious and Bobby solve occasional cases involving threat, physical danger and violence. Scholar Horsley argues (2005, p.19) that

> "[...] the convoluted crimes central to the [classic] tradition is not just a formal requirement (permitting the exercise of the detective's solving

intelligence)."



Bobby Jasoos: In a local café, Bobby meets different types of clients who expect her to solve petty domestic cases (dealing with intergenerational and marital distrust) that pay her bills but do not satisfy her professionally.



In a disguise as a secretary, Precious has a look very different from her usual self. Precious is at a family home to solve a case about poisoning. She tries to taste the stuff in the kitchen while chatting with the cook who snubs her for touching things. She finds that the cook is a very unhappy man working for the "mad people" in the house.

In fact, underneath the differences of cases and approaches of female and male detectives, lies a shared probing of the "elaborate deceptions of a sophisticated society" (p. 19). In *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, the cases reflect the hidden tensions beneath the surface of the transitional culture of Hyderabad and Gaborone where instability in identities of people plays out in their domestic problems. Bobby solves more cases of intergenerational distrust while Precious encounters several cases of infidelity and familial mistrust. In a case, Precious disguises as her influential client's secretary to investigate the reason for a family falling sick after having food. Her cover is blown as soon as she enters the family home. After having dinner, everyone including Precious has an upset stomach. The phone lines are disrupted. In the morning, she is served two separate sets of tea. Precious brings the family and the cook on the same table and reveals the truth. The younger brother is jealous of elder brother's success and is disrespected by his wife and elder brother. He gets into smuggling in order to earn quick money and become as powerful as his brother. Poison is added to the dinner and morning tea by the younger brother and his wife hoping that the cook will be blamed as he went scot-free in his first attempt of poisoning the family many days ago. Precious raises the fees (most of which is donated to an orphanage) for risking her life. Emphasis on characteristics of reasoning, perception, clues and evidence, courage and ability to solve deception points towards the "connection with an identifiable tradition" (Reddy, 2003, p.199). However, Bobby and Precious are also uniquely different from the classic and hardboiled detectives.

Departure from the classic and hard-boiled detective traditions

Comparing points of resonance and departure is not an easy task as the male



The family, including the cook, sitting at the dining table while Precious reveals the mystery. Each one who is involved in the crime admits to being guilty.

detective tradition is not a homogenous one because of the existence of a range of characterizations that vary from cynical and violent to an oversimplified image of an all-solving and smooth functioning private eye to "Agatha Christie-style feminized tradition" (Horsley, 2005, p. 7). Moreover, fiction writing is read differently by each reader according to their context and sensibilities. Yet as Horsley (2005) says, detective fiction—classic and hardboiled is identified with predominantly white, middle class, heterosexual "male values and roles" (p. vi). In comparison, *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* are non-white, non-middle class, female heterosexual characters. As Horsley (2005, p. 28) points out the classic detective occupies a "liminal" position compared to the hard-boiled private eye though he is "less implicated in (and less threatened by) the underlying disorder of contemporary society". McCracken (as cited by Horsley, 2005) stresses that the character of classic detective explores a variety of "subversive identities which reflect the different facets of contemporary anxiety within an individual" (p. 31). As Horsley (2005) suggests, Holmes' conflicting tendencies are apparent in the way he is a "melancholic and drug-taking bohemian aesthete" but equally he is an "energetic exemplar of intellectual power" (p. 31). Bilkis and Precious combine intuitive and rational traits without being an intellectual giant. They are creative problem solvers and logical thinkers as Holmes. They share a strong sense of intuition with Holmes and Marple but they are far from melancholic or bohemian nor are they gripped in addiction. They share a sense of adventure with the classic detective without suffering from mood swings or major inconsistencies. Their personalities (especially Precious) are grounded but not fixed.

Bobby Jasoos and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* are very different from the mainstream detective novels as they offer specific gendered and cultural inflections to the genre. The female detectives handle cases dealing with small-scale, intimate crimes and dishonesty in human relationships. The narrative trajectories shift the focus from the crime itself to the investigation (Priestman, 2003, p. 4). Precious settles her cases, assisted by her female assistant Grace Makutsi using observation, understanding, tact and talking to different people involved in the case. Bilkis, on the other hand, bends towards experimentation and verification of her premises by deliberately setting herself up in situations supported by a motley crew of local men of her neighborhood—a tea shop assistant, an internet café owner and a techie young boy.

Bilkis and Precious solve petty cases of human weaknesses and sometimes bigger ones too, bringing reconciliation for the clients and some sort of financial rewards. Cases involving murders were a central driver for the stories of golden age of detective fiction. In *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, the cases deal with domestic infidelity, professional malpractice, insurance fraud, negligence, missing animals, missing people (living and dead), smuggling, witch craft, burglary, attack by wild animals and intergeneration conflict, among others. In *Bobby Jasoos*, Bilkis solves cases that range from parents spying on their deviant adult progenies, a client getting rid of marriage proposals brought to him by his parents, missing people, and illicit affairs of married and unmarried. Her cases take on troubled social and filial relationships.

In a case, Bilkis is hired by Saida, a mother to spy on her marriageable daughter (Afreen) whom she suspects is having a secret affair with someone. Through



Bobby visits Saida (mother) and Afreen's (daughter) home. Afreen asks Bobby to keep silent about the results of spying while Saida asks Bobby to keep silent about the fact that she hired her to spy on Afreen.

Afreen, Bilkis negotiates a very high price with Lala (a local gangster) for keeping their affair a secret. She is not afraid of Lala, who is a terror in the whole community. She handles her cases with a presence of mind though she carries a general angst which spills into rough handling of people.



Bobby, aware of Lala's (a local goon's) reputation for violence, sets up a meeting in a public place. Through his assistant, he expects Bobby to walk up to him but has to relent under Bobby's pressure. Resentful Lala pays Bobby a huge sum that will pay her bills and an amount unaffordable for Afreen's mother who was her original client. In exchange, Bobby gives him the mobile-captured photos in a pen drive and promises to keep his affair with Afreen a secret.

Missing people is a common ingredient of many detective plots, but the cinematic treatment determines how the conventions of the genre are repeated or pushed to new levels. They both solve cases where someone is missing. Bilkis and Precious handle them in ways that is different from not only their male counterparts but also from each other.

In a case, Precious hears of a boy missing. Through JLB Matekoni, she finds a bag of *muti* containing material for black magic in a car in his garage. Precious devices a plot to reach the owner of the car, Charlie Gotso, who would not risk losing his belongings. Without involving the police or weapons, she manages to return the bag to Charlie (a dangerous criminal) and in exchange gets the address of a man who uses the limbs of young children for witchcraft. No one could dare speak to Charlie Gusto in a public place and negotiate the way she could. Both Precious and Bilkis can handle criminals but Precious can be vulnerable in a few moments while handling them especially if she risks those dear to her.



Precious and her friend JLB Matekoni in possession of a bag of *muti* belonging to gangster Charlie Gusto. *Muti* is a medicine used for witchcraft, which can involve occasional murder and mutilation of body parts.



Precious negotiates with Charlie Gusto in a cake shop at Kgale Hill market place. In exchange for a bag of *muti* hidden in the cake, Precious gets an important address. Since Charlie eats a bit of the cake,



Precious is in a vulnerable moment as Charlie threatens to harm people whom she cares for.

Precious makes sure he pays for it.	
	
Following on a basic map drawn by Charlie, Precious drives through the barren and isolated countryside to reach the house of the people involved in the witchcraft.	Precious reassures the boy who went missing. She is relieved to see that his fingers are unharmed. In the meanwhile, the lady who brought her to the cattle post runs away for fear of being caught by the police.

Bobby is younger and closer to hardboiled detective in terms of range of emotions, so her vulnerability remains unexpressed**.** Precious drives alone, deep into the countryside, stretching into Kalahari Desert, without a companion or gadgets by her side. She reaches her destination to find that the concerned person is away but she scares his wife enough for her to lead Precious to a cattle post where the missing boy has been kept. The wife runs away into the wilderness while Precious reassures the frail boy. After an exhausting overnight journey, she reunites the missing boy with his father. This is a familiar suffering to her as she has suffered the loss of a newborn baby, but hasn't hardened to others' suffering. Charlie Gusto is handed to the police and Precious solves the case on a *suo motu* basis. In her characteristic way, she's tough with problematic people and considerate with co-operative people who are assured of confidentiality.

As a female African character, Precious resonates with other black female detectives created by black women writers. Christian's study (as cited in Horsley, 2005) shows that black female detectives "subvert two of the most common stereotypes in white Southern literature, the mammy or Aunt Jemima figure (black, fat, nurturing, kind, strong) and the concubine" (p. 235). Precious is "black, fat, kind and strong" but she is far from a mammy or Aunt Jemina character as she has the agency to meaningfully negotiate the course of her life and the lives of those around her.



Unlike Precious, Grace depends on someone to drive her for the task of spying as she has never driven a vehicle. She begins the case of finding out about the infidelity of the butcher's wife by following that woman, taking pictures of the wife and her married boyfriend while BK, their neighbor and friend, drives her.

In *Bobby Jasoos*, a wealthy Muslim NRI, Anees Khan hires the services of Bilkis to find three missing people. Bilkis enters those spaces where she is likely to find them by becoming an insider. For instance, she disguises herself as a client in a beauty parlor, a bangle shop owner in a crowded market, a horoscope reader in the street corner and a student enrolled in English speaking classes. She eventually meets the first missing person (Nilofer) in the English classes. Having learnt her lessons, to find the second person, she acquires a list and sends an invitation with new clothes to all the girls with the name Amna so that they can participate in a fake audition for a TV serial. Bilkis disguises herself as the superstitious owner of an entertainment channel and is successful in finding Amna.

The recurrence of certain types of domestic cases in each narrative points towards the wider social problems that the narrative seeks to explore.



Unlike Precious, Grace is awkward while talking to people. While she manages to get answers to a lot of important questions from the talkative maids, she lands up in trouble with them. She has to run away from being physical mishandled.



Precious and Grace, unlike their hardboiled counterparts, always have time for bush tea and cake to relax themselves. Later, they will discuss the case involving the moral dilemma of speaking the truth to the client (a butcher) but saving his family from ruin because of the harshness of the truth.

> "While the male-authored hardboiled novels repeatedly invoke a world whose corruption and decadence threaten to engulf us all, with the hero standing alone against the forces of evil" (Reddy, 2003, p. 198).

On the other hand, the world of the lady detectives is not so dark and solitary, as there is a sense of wisdom, compassion and community. When the narrative of *Bobby Jasoos* plants clues to implicate Bobby's chief client-patron in the global sex-trade, suggesting a decadent world, this suggestion is subverted in the finale to reveal a different truth. It's a genre specific narrative strategy that has prevailed in other detective plots as well. [10] Anees Khan hires Bobby's detective services not to abduct young girls but rather to reunite his family which was scattered by communal violence. The female detectives deal with deception, a form of corruption but not a completely dark one. It is presented as a form of selfishness, weakness, anxiety and mistake that can be forgiven.

In *The No.1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, a butcher hires Precious' services to investigate the truth about his family. With Grace's assistance, she arrives at the truth that the butcher's wife is having an affair with a rich married man who is paying the expensive school fees for his son, who is actually a biological offspring of the rich man and not the butcher. She confirms the butcher's suspicion but hides the son's information. She is prepared to live with its uncomfortable consequences because she realizes that the married rich man will not have a second wife and the butcher will be devastated by losing his wife and son. She finds a way to maintain the status quo in her client's life but also rendering her services to him. Precious says, "everyday our work brings marriages of deception, compromise, and convenience and perhaps I have added to that" (Episode # 4: Problems in Moral Philosophy). Despite the contradictions in people's behavior, Precious believes in human relationships and manages to build and enjoy good friendships.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Violence and female detectives



Bilkis chases the driver of Anees Khan (her chief patron client) whom she suspects of being involved in the global sex trade. She doesn't know what has happened to the missing women she has traced for him.

The narratives of *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* and *Bobby Jasoos* are not littered with violence, explosion and chases though there is a small element of it in *Bobby Jasoos*. These stories are "a far cry from the mean streets of Chandler, Mosley, Hammett et al" (Kevin Burton Smith). Bobby bashes up someone in order to extract information. She strangles her first missing person in a typical police procedural and Bombay cinema action sequence, using politically incorrect behavior associated with the hardboiled tradition. She also has resonance with a strand of "butt-kicking feminist private eyes of the U.S. tradition," but in line with female detectives, Bilkis does not glorify in her "physical triumph over an adversary" (Reddy, 2003, p. 199). As an extension, Bobby's language is far from the polite culture of Botswana that Precious embodies. Though Bilkis is politer than the hard-boiled detective who acts a counterpoint to the good taste and breeding of the classic detective. Christianson (as cited in Horsley, 2005, p. 273) argues that the hard-boiled private eye is "scandalous, indecorous, vulgar, offensive—and violent."



Bilkis dunks the driver in the water trough. He tells her that Anees Khan has left town though Khan is still in Hyderabad looking for the third missing person.



Bathing ritual of taking a dip in the river by a religious group in Gaborone.



In a street café, seeing a lady cry, Precious introduces herself and offers to help the lady find her missing husband.



Precious with her assistant Grace practice using a rifle before she uses it to resolve a case. Precious learnt to shoot in her childhood from her father.

Precious has never resorted to beating people to extract information. In contrast, she has a history of being physically beaten by her ex-husband which made her lose her only child. Both women have never used guns to injure people. The only case where there is use of a rifle and knife accompanied with shooting, killing and blood is when Precious kills a crocodile in search for some evidence for a client. The client's husband went missing after joining a new religious group. It is suspected that he most likely drowned while having a ritual communal bath in the



From left to right: Munna (tea shop assistant), Bobby (lady detective), Sohail (a techie young boy) and Shetty (an Internet café owner) watching the movement of people and goods around a posh hotel. Bobby is assisted by them in some of her cases that involve unfamiliar terrain or are on a scale unmanageable by one person.



Space in the Agency Office used by Precious. She is speaking to Grace while BK interrupts to borrow an electric kettle.



Space in the Agency Office used by Grace. She has two old typewriters. Together the two machines can type everything as each one has some missing keys.

river**.** Precious acts violently towards the crocodile but only "when necessary—usually in self-defense or in the defense of another—and understands that violence as having a lasting impact on her" (Reddy, 2003, p. 199). The female detectives do not have a violent disposition nor are they timid. They can handle dangerous gangsters and unscrupulously competitive male detectives because they resist patriarchal control in any form in their lives.

De-glamourizing the professional tools of the female detectives

The choice of cases and clients informs the style of doing detective business. Precious and Bobby do not require the most technologically sophisticated tools such as fancy cars, mobile phones, computers, guns and other accoutrements, as do their male counterparts.

> "Precious Ramotswe has no blue steel pistol, just two desks, two chairs, a telephone and an old typewriter. Then there is Mma Ramotswe herself. (Mma is a local honorific.)" (Michael Wines).

Precious went around town looking for different office spaces in the city. She decides for an old post office which is situated in a modest market place which is accessible to common people and buzzing with ordinary activities. On the other hand, Bilkis rents a shared office space with the owner of a local internet café—she also uses a shelf, chair and desk but none of these belong to her. As she progresses, she moves into a sparsely furnished, rented, but independent office, overlooking her male competitor's premises. She does not have a mobile phone but borrows from her friend Sohail, as required. Precious does not have a mobile phone, either. In fact, she resists the idea of having a telephone connection in her office, but relents when her assistant Grace Makutsi insists.



"Before": Precious converts an old unused post office into her Agency office at Kgale Hill.



"After": Precious refurbished the space with her feminine and individual sensibility. Clients wait for Precious in the open verandah, enjoying the view of the world going by.



Bilkis' shared office with internet café owner Shetty. Shetty loves to hear all the gossip and in exchange charges her a



Bilkis walks through the streets of old Hyderabad, which she is very familiar with. Like Grace, she cannot afford any vehicle

nominal rent. But Bilkis prefers to meet her clients in a friend's (Munna) café where they are more comfortable.	nor can she operate one.

They are mainly uninvolved in kinetically charged chase sequences. While solving cases, Bilkis peacefully walks around the streets but occasionally she is chased or chases someone. Precious follows her suspects in her old van and catches them when they least expect her through employing her tact rather than high-speed chases and fiery stunts. She has never been followed. Bilkis takes an occasional ride on a low speed, two-wheeler scooter driven by Sohail as she cannot drive.[11] [open notes in new window] On the other hand, Precious learnt driving from her father who gave the van as part of her inheritance. In a growing culture of short shelf-life of products, Precious has a traditional worldview. She treats her van as a loyal companion whom she is not ready to replace.



Precious zips through the landscape of Botswana in her beloved white van inherited from her father who taught her to drive.

The image of Bobby astride on the pillion of the scooter facing backwards and holding her binoculars seems to be a pun on surveillance and the typical tools used by detectives. Conventionally, sleuthing involves observing and following people without their knowledge—in a way that a hawk watches its prey. Neither of the lady detectives depend exclusively on covert observation. The voyeurism involved in seeing but not being seen and observing but not understanding resonates with ideas of problematic male gaze. In contrast, Precious uses a style of investigation predominantly involving overt observation and talking to people involved in the case, using covert form of obsevation sparingly. Both women possess detailed knowledge of people and places, which explains their preference of methods. Precious' approach is akin to a participatory ethnographer who builds rapport and empathy to understand the dynamics of the situation. On the other hand, Bilkis mostly enters the field of detection under a disguise. These lady detectives replace voyeurism with other comprehensive forms of investigation. This is unlike the classic male detective, Sherlock Holmes who besides being a shrewd detective,



Bilkis astride the pillion of Sohail's scooter symbolically looks through her binoculars for a missing person.

> "remains one of history's foremost masters of disguise. His profession demanded it: Concealing his identity allowed Holmes to trail suspects without their knowledge, slip his enemies' traps time after time [...]. Holmes's efforts went much further than simply donning a costume. To master the art of personal camouflage, every aspect of your person, from your clothes and hair to the expressions, mannerism in which you speak and carry yourself, must be altered beyond recognition. His very soul seemed to vary with each fresh part he assumed" (Ransom Riggs, 2009).

Holmes' character had a degree of seriousness in disguise that marked the classic detective genre. In contrast, Precious' occasional attempts to disguise prove to be a failure. However, Bilkis easily dons different disguises to solve cases as an amateur but as she progresses, she sheds this method. In addition, there is a comic lightness to some of her incoherently constructed disguises, suggesting a detective-in-progress and a pun on the seriousness of disguise for the classic



To solve her cases, Bilkis disguises in different roles such as a *maulvi* (highly qualified Islamic scholar), peon (low-ranking worker), palmist, hawker, TV channel producer, entertainment tout, nerd student, a beggar etc.

detective.



Bilkis is in disguise as a *maulvi* taking pictures on her mobile in the middle of the night.



Noticed by the gang, Bilkis smartly runs towards the crowded night bazaar during Ramadan where she can easily disappear.

Bilkis gets her big break when Anees Khan engages her to find missing girls named Nilofer and Amna with a birthmark on their hand and shoulder and Ali with a missing toe. To solve the cases, Bilkis assumes many disguises without much preparation. Disguises prove to be an effective technique for her to solve petty and big cases such as finding Nilofer. While finding Amna, she combines other methods along with disguising herself as an influential person from the entertainment industry. With help from a crew, they organize an audition for a fake reality show. They expect Amna to participate in the event for the promise of fame and fortune.



Poster of the fake audition is pasted on the walls of Moghulpura by Sohail.



Bilkis turned entertainment tout (foreground) addresses the crowd of aspiring girls, each one with the name Amna (mid-ground), and her crew of men in disguise (background).



Having successfully solved the case and received a hefty payment, overjoyed Bilkis finds her victory and freedom short-lived as her mother orders her to report home immediately to resolve some private affairs.

We, female detectives instead of I, classic male detective

> "In its own historical context, classic detective fiction is closely bound up with classic liberalism" (Horsley, 2005, p. 18).

In his own time, Sherlock Holmes, [12] for example, can be seen as celebrating the ideals of personal freedom and the rule of law, and responding to the urban problems that were, by the turn of the century, says McCann (as cited in Horsley, 2005, p.19) "providing a serious challenge to the tenets of liberal theory". Precious and Bilkis celebrate the ideals of personal freedom and rule of law within traditional societies in transition. Though their ways are different from each other and from the classic and hardboiled counterpart. Precious upholds liberal values of tolerance more than Bobby. They are an intrinsic part of their community but their choice of profession and determination to succeed sets them apart. They do not always make the right moves in the formative period of their careers but they are quick to learn and accept their limitations. In the narratives that I am discussing, the female protagonists interact with a rich array of characters ranging from supporting, antagonist, and neutral —few of them are unselfish people, most of whom can be very selfish and deceptive, and couple of them can be dangerous

(at least in the TV series).

Other female detective novels written by feminist writers

> "focus on solitary central characters, as do hardboiled novels. However, solitariness for a woman has far different meanings than does solitariness for a man, as historically women have been defined by their relationships with men and have been refused the right to self-definition" (p. 197).

The narrative develops the characters, Precious and Bilkis, in a manner that self-definition is integral to them. A sense of *I* is not an absolute understanding for them but rather comes in relation to a sense of Other. For these detectives, this sense of a collective *I* is shaped by gender, race, class, community, dispositions and so on. Bilkis and Precious challenge the 'myth of a lone hero' as they run small scale, homegrown agencies that require them to depend heavily on personal resources, local knowledge, goodwill of the community and the unflinching support of secondary characters. Bilkis and Precious are neither employed in any top Secret Intelligence Service (FBI or CIA, ex-KGB, MI5 & MI6) nor work for a large private agency. They are neither larger than life characters nor do they derive their power because of proximity to the powerful. In contrast, they depend on themselves and a network of strong relationships. Precious has on her side her loyal and intelligent but tightly-wound assistant Grace Makutsi (Anika Noni Rose).

> "Grace prides herself on superlative organizational and administrative



Besides her abilities of detection, administration and tea-making, Grace Makutsi can push away all sorts of animals (chickens included) that find home at *Ladies' No 1 Detective Agency.*



Precious and Grace try to convince JLB Matekoni and BK to disguise themselves as cops for a case dealing with a fraudulent dentist.



Precious has never used her friend BK's hair and beauty salon for personal grooming. However, she has often had her very old van repaired at Speedy Motors garage, owned by her unpretentious friend JLB, the most reliable and competent mechanic in Gaborone.

skills, often noting that she scored 97% on her secretarial exam" (Alyx Vessey).

Grace has worked her way up by navigating through poverty, prejudice, singlehandedly running a household and caregiving for her sick brother. She is the fastest-typing secretary in Gaborone. She is far from the stereotyped female secretary and has a quirky sense of dressing. Precious respects her inputs and makes the final analysis but trusts Grace with investigation process. Their friendship has some resonance with that of Holmes and Watson, however, the ladies are far intimate than them. They bond well and respect each other though they have their differences.

The narrative of *Ladies' No 1 Detective Agency* shifts in perspective from Precious (I, main protagonist) to Grace and other characters (We, part of the world of the female protagonist) but the narrative voice favours Precious. For example, the audience can hear her intermittent voice-over, which is autobiographical in nature. The tone of the voice-over is reflective, optimistic and content without being unrealistic. The autobiographical voice in the narrative is an important feature of hard-boiled and U.S. female private detective novels (Horsley, 2005, p. 263). But unlike them, Precious' autobiographical voice is neither hectoring nor self-lacerating but rather an expression of human emotions and thoughts. Her short spells of the monologue are never aggressive rather human, enlightening and calming.

Besides employing Grace professionally, sometimes Precious seeks assistance in professional matters from her loyal male friends though she doesn't expect any concessions as a woman from them.They are trustworthy JLB Matekoni (shy suitor and eventually her husband) proprietor of Tlokweng Road Speedy Motors and loving and patient BK, a flamboyant gay hairdresser (owner of Last Chance Salon adjacent to her office). In line with her earlier female detectives, Precious gives "considerable thought to her relationships with others, working out the ethics of friendship" (Reddy, 2003, p. 198). Unlike her precursors in the hardboiled tradition who cannot draw support across age, gender, profession and hierarchy from people around them, Precious can draw support from very different people including children without losing her sense of self. She also has three deceased mentors from whom she draws strength in times of distress—her upright, wise, and kind father Obed Ramotswe; the first President of Botswana late Sereste Khama, a compassionate and visionary leader; and Clove Anderson whose book *Principles of Private Investigation* is a professional guide for her.

In contrast, Bobby finds occasional inspiration from the detective and police procedurals aired on private Indian channels. As a small time detective, she cannot afford a professional colleague and seeks support from her male friends: "[Shetty] a plump internet café owner," Munna, a tall guy who works in the café that Bobby meets her clients, Sohail, "a rangy tech support-type fellow" and a "good-looking, ambitious TV star anchor and ex-client [Tasawur] who tags her as she goes about solving the final big case [and eventually becomes her fumbling lover]" (Gupta, 2014).

The female protagonist and supporting characters in *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* are departure from Holmes stories. In the latter (Reddy, 2003) women are dark or disruptive whereby posing a threat to masculine order

and must be contained. Secondly, they are inexplicable presences who require male protection. Thirdly, women can never be a detective in a Holmesian world. [13] Instead, Precious and Bilkis are the 'heroes' of their narratives though they function with supporting characters. Precious has a very supporting friendship with her close friend, Mma Potokwane, the matron of the orphan farm whose advice and affection she deeply values. Bilkis (similar to Precious) also has a supporting woman in her life. Her mother shields her from constant criticism from her father and other family members in the tradition of some female authored (such as Cordelia Grey novels) female detectives where mothering relationships are presented as more positive and less destructive than fathering relationships. Scholar Horsley (2005, p. 260) explains this characterization as an attempt to turn around the crisis of the "post-second World War American society which betrayed an ideal of mothering that might be said to embody some of the most generous and selfless of liberal values—compassion, tolerance, gentleness". Precious embodies these values wholeheartedly despite having no memory of her mother. Yet, Bobby and Precious have a strong supportive inner mother that allows them to handle the challenges of the outside world.



In the early days of the Agency, Precious had to accept a case of a missing dog. Grace chases the missing dog under a table in the market place.

The male protagonist of hard boiled noir is seduced by the femme fatale and for him, family, friendships or community are entirely irrelevant. *Bobby Jasoos* has no femme fatale or its male version and there is no negative female character in the narrative. In contrast, *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* has one dangerous, seductive female vamp, Violet Sephotho who seduces influential men for money. Violet ends up rubbing shoulders with Precious and Grace as she is a culprit in many of their investigations. Violet is jealous of Grace's intelligence and hard-work and her devious plans are always disrupted by them. The character of Violet stands in contrast to the feminist female detective stories where the villain turns out to be female but "she is never a seductress in search of power and money, but either a patriarchal enforcer (such as V. I.'s aunt in Killing Orders, 1985) or a woman trying to end or avenge her own victimization" (Reddy, 2003, p. 198). There are women clients that Precious meets who fall in the two categories of trying to end or avenge their own victimization. But the main and supporting female characters are not sketched in the similar light.



Violet Sephotho, her rival since the Secretarial College days, calls on Grace while she is busy with her detection work.

The female detectives solve a case as a team—having discussions and delegating work according to each person's strength. These lady detectives share a common feature with other women detectives in the British writings where their 'strength lies in teamwork rather than solitary brilliance' (Priestman, 2003, p. 5). As the book series continues, Precious transforms into being an ace detective, having a group of friends, wife to JLB Matekoni, mother to her two foster children and managing a household. She takes care of domestic responsibilities since her husband is not a modern husband but she doesn't complain about it and her family life is far from oppressive.



Precious' character stands as a critique of the absence of such pressures of ordinary life for her traditional male detective. The experience of parenting and daily household responsibility is shared feature between Precious and fictional

Violet taunts Grace calling Grace a dog catcher and compares her successful job with the detective's, reminding Grace that beauty and technique outweigh integrity.

writing about black women detectives. This feature ties them to "community concerns and sharply differentiates them from their solitary white counterparts" (Reddy, 2003, p. 2011). In addition, the culture of Botswana and life of Precious are a critique to the normative whiteness of the detective genre itself.

Precious and Bilkis have chosen to work as a matter of choice rather than because of the exigencies of circumstance. They enjoy some economic cushioning which saves them from constant external pressure or the rules of strict hierarchy among men. They are unlike the black male detective such as Easy Rawlins (1940-70s) created by writer Walter Mosley whose ability to live on his own terms is constantly under threat (Priestman, 2003, pp. 218-219). Precious makes decisions that weigh between being morally right and being compassionate. With leadership qualities, Bilkis and Precious lead their personal and professional relationships by functioning collaboratively than hierarchically, in contrast to typical male detectives. Thereby, offering an alternative reading to the intense masculinity of the classic and hardboiled.

Critiquing romance as a central narrative device



Learning patience from her father, Baby Precious balances a meerkat on her head.

Precious does not contend with a patriarch who is bent on forcing her into marriage while Bobby ingeniously uses her "profession" to dodge, manage, and outwit both her conservative father and prospective suitor. None of these aspects of characterization would feature in a conventional detective genre. This theme resonates with the female detective novels that tend to focus on "feminist concerns and to include feminist critiques of culture, with particular attention to the significance of work [...] in women's lives" (Reddy, 2003, p. 195). This poses a direct alternative to other popular fiction genres that focus on centralization of romance.

In Bobby's homestead, the older (aged aunt and mother) and younger generation of women (sister) are involved with domestic chores and engaged with loud TV serials that act as a smart counterpart to what Bilkis wants to do with her life. On the other hand, Precious is comfortable with balancing professional ambitions with domestic responsibilities though she has a loyal maid to assist her. Her sense of independence is underwritten by her orphan status "a standard qualification for female private eyes" (Horsley, 2005, p. 255).[14] She was brought up by her paternal aunt (in the novels) and loving father who taught her many things about living a happy life for which she is extremely grateful.[15] In comparison to Bilkis single-minded focus on her career, Precious divides her time between work, friends, home, and herself in the novels but in the TV series she also seems to be preoccupied with her work which resonates with male counterparts. Despite her hectic life, she has moments of solitude but she is not crippled by her loneliness. Despite being single women, Precious and Bilkis are not desperately looking for a suitable match.



From a distance, Precious and her father look for animals in the wild.

This characterization suits Bobby's positioning in the narrative and Vidya Balan's sensibility as an actress.

> "Often the romantic plot is missing in her [Balan's] films, which is unusual for commercial Hindi cinema—she is not the trophy who should fit for male characters to win. Invariably, in her most celebrated films, her character's goals and motivations are not to find love, seduce, look pretty, 'get her man', and marry well; instead there are different compulsions that drive her characters" (Bose, 2014, p. 398). [16]

Yet, as the narrative moves forward, Precious and Bilkis have a growing friendship with JLB Matekoni (actor Lucian Msamati) and Tasawur (actor Ali



Except for snakes, Precious learnt to love all animals from her father. Two young male giraffes play with each other.



In the middle of the night, Bilkis boldly climbs up the ladder to negotiate with nervous Tasawur.



Bilkis, nicknamed Bobby, received a phone call from her worried mother who wants her to return home before her father arrives. The mother pleads her to work at decent hours lest the girls in the family remain unmarried. As they speak, Bobby comes home to her mother's relief.

Fazal) respectively. They decline romantic advances made by these men. In fact, both men are far from the 'ideal parameters of masculine identity, desire, and achievement' (Horsley, 2005, p. 252). When younger, Precious had burnt her fingers in a short-lived marriage with an abusive and womanizing musician, Note Mokoti.[17] Unlike the passionate romance involving physical attraction and intimacy in the mainstream action genre, Precious' friendship, engagement and marriage to Mr. J.L.B. Matekoni is a gradual process of building a bond of trust and understanding. On the other hand, unlike the fleeting and upfront romance between a mainstream hero and his female romantic interest, Bilkis and Tasawur develop an unconventional friendship that unfolds into a romance that is not straightforward till the end. There is no kissing, caressing, and touching between the romantic couple except in a dreamy song and dance sequence. Precious and Bilkis have an equal partnership with their male companions rather than based on manipulation, insecurity, pressure, deceit or fear. Precious has a cultivated charm to handle men who admire her, unlike Bilkis. Romance is neither the center of the narrative nor the epicenter of relations between women protagonists and JLB and Tasawur. These romantic friendships are secondary to the plot development and run parallel in an unassuming manner in the flow of the narrative.

Opposition to the female detectives

Despite their loyal supporters and admirers, Precious and Bilkis also face stiff opposition because of their gender. But they find ingenuous ways to manage it. In the characteristic fashion of a linear narrative, the plot of each story/script advances when the protagonists face resistance from the antagonists. Bilkis' disgruntled and ultra-conservative father is a well-respected patriarch in the community, and wants his daughter to get married and give up her dream of becoming the best detective.

> "Bilkis, accompanied by her mother, walks over to her father's room to hand over her first big pay packet to him. The old man curtly refuses to accept the money, leaving both his wife and daughter at the end of their tether" (Das, 2014).

Bilkis rebels against patriarchal control symbolized by her father by stepping away from the traditional boundaries. She has odd working hours including late nights which worries her parents**.** Precious also drives around solving cases that take her to all sorts of places and timings. She defies traditional occupations assigned to women and men of her tribe by being the only detective in Botswana yet is well-versed in the traditional roles, maintains warm relations with people and respects traditions. Hence, each character engages with patriarchy differently.

Bilkis faces more opposition inside home whereas Precious faces more opposition outside home. They are differently equipped to face the problems of the public sphere, namely, the challenge of a start-up company and the aggression from male counterparts. Precious faces problems with three difficult men—her ex-husband Note Mokoti, her Indian client Patel whose patronizing towards her because she is an African single middle class woman and Cephas Buthelezi, a new detective in town. *Ex-CID. Ex-New York. Ex-cellent* reads the sign outside the Satisfaction Guarantee Detective Agency owned by Buthelezi, an incompetent and a dangerous rival, who uses devious means to project himself as superior to Precious and Grace. On the other hand, Bilkis' competitor Sodhi is insulting and



Sodhi publicly insults Bobby in his office when she begs him to train and employ her as a detective.

denies her a much-needed opportunity. He insists that a formal training is a necessity for becoming an apprentice. This close minded attitude prompts Bobby to open her own agency, opposite to his office.

> "It is obviously a man's world and the odds that Bilkis is up against are revealed in a scene early in the film. The protagonist walks into the office of a private detective agency in Moghulpura. It is staffed entirely by stuffy-looking guys" (Saibal Chatterjee).

By proving their superior competency as detectives and as human beings, the lady detectives silence aggression, competition and criticism towards them. These women break the glass ceiling by solving cases successfully and sustaining their small-time detective companies.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Note (ex-husband of Precious) visits her house to intimate and blackmail her. In exchange for indefinite supply of money, Note would keep quiet about them not being divorced.

Evolution of the female protagonists

Every comforting and challenging encounter in Precious and Bobby's personal and professional life forces them to grow out of their fears, ignorance and passivity and create an internal space to embrace new situations with dignity. In *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, four inter-related incidents propel Precious to shed her baggage, transform and embrace the new opportunities waiting for her.

The heightened climax begins when Cephas Buthelezi invites Precious' ex-husband Note Mokoti to Gaborone. Note blackmails Precious after hearing that JLB Matekoni is interested in marrying her. An arrogant wealthy Indian businessman Patel suspects that his deviant teenage daughter Nandira is dating an unworthy African boy and assigns Precious the case to confirm his suspicion. Precious tries to dissuade him from spying his daughter but he insults her. He also hires Precious to find the cause for break-ins at Kgale hill where Patel, BK, and Precious have their offices. Cephas Buthelezi's attempt to snatch Patel's cases from Precious fuels the greedy side of Note Mokoti. He tries to kill Precious by driving his car rashly into her van, both escaping an accident by a friction of a second. Meanwhile, JLB Matekoni in his uncharacteristic manner is skipping work and spending unusually long hours trying to learn fishing.



Having done her research, Precious finds that she was never legally married to Note and having overcome her fear of him, she handles his physical aggression differently than when she was younger.



The only male detective in Gaborone, Cephas Buthelezi is blinded in competition, scares Precious by driving his car rashly into her van escaping accident by a friction of a second.



Late into night, Precious reaches for the fishing area while JLB heads towards home, their cars driving past each other to their surprise.



They stop to connect after a long time - the only scene in the TV series when Precious and JLB hug each other affectionately, in keeping with the detective genre where romance is not critical to the plot.

These incidents leave Precious feeling vulnerable. Metaphorically, when she

chases away the monkeys who are creating a nuisance in the Kgale Hill shops, she overcomes her fear of her ex-husband, leading to the resolution of the narrative conflict. Precious thinks she has solved the case of Nadira only to find that she was outsmarted by her. Precious reaches for JLB Matekoni and asks him to again propose to her. JLB Matekoni proposes to his *Real Botswana Diamond*. Precious resolves the issue of Note peacefully but firmly.

Likewise, towards the climax of the film, Bilkis is struggling to uncover Khan's background, find Ali's whereabouts with Tasawur's initiative and feels uncomfortable with her unwanted engagement but also unexpected change of feelings for Tasawur. She is also thrown out of the house by her father. She reconciles the conflicts eventually, but still remains unsure of her relationship with Tasawur. When challenged, the better side comes out. Precious and Bilkis are both strong characters in their own ways, but Precious is a more nuanced character in comparison. Yet, their personas are realistic and humane compared to those of their hardboiled counterparts.

De-glamourizing the female detectives

In the TV series, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, seeing Precious, a woman in the street comments "she is the size of a small elephant! How could she go undercover?" The writers and directors have chosen actors that can stand against the popular perception of sleek female detectives and assistants that are portrayed in the masculine detective genre. Bilkis and Precious are ordinary looking and traditionally built women who do not undertake physical exercise or sport.[18] [open notes in new window]

> "Film sleuths usually exude chiseled sexiness and a noir persona. But as Mr. McCall Smith puts it, Precious Ramotswe is "the fat lady detective": rounded, not chiseled; softhearted, not dark" (Michael Wines).

Actresses Jill Scott (Precious) and Vidya Balan (Bilkis) seem to be confident of their appearance while radiating star power. The camera loves their charming faces without gazing at them voyeuristically for most of the screen-time. They have enigmatic voices, their eyes do the talking for them and they have a "star smile" (Cynthia Fuchs). Vidya Balan "acts with her eyes, not through constant exaggerated facial play, expressions and self-conscious posturing" (Bose, 2014, p. 400).[19] In the book and TV series, Precious "often sets people at ease by mentioning that her figure is "traditional" and conventionally attractive to older beauty standards within African culture" (Fuchs, 2009). Likewise, Vidya Balan represents an assertive minority in a film industry which is "preoccupied with physical appearance of women, their size and skin tone ([the slimmer] and lighter, the better)" (Bose, 2014, p. 397).[20] In general, Balan's measured performance, choice of strong female characters and ability to balance feminism ("unconventional image") and feminity ("earthy image") draw from the rich tradition of 1970s and 80s "alternative cinema of compelling performances" by iconic actresses such as Shabana Azmi and Smita Patil (Bose, 2014, p. 398).



At the entrance of a posh hotel, Bobby is uncomfortable with the saree, heels, mannerism

In terms of their dress, Bilkis and Precious are well-presented but they are unfashionable. Precious has a practical approach to dressing and carries herself with ease. Unlike her on-screen character of Precious Ramotswe, Jill Scott can look very glamorous off-screen. In the Indian narrative, Bilkis is awkward with the "traditional feminine" get-up while wearing stilettos and saree when disguised to pass as an upper class woman entering a five-star hotel to research her client's background. In the 1960s and 70s, some Hindi films presented a rural and economically disadvantaged female character who would shed her folk culture to

and unfamiliarity of the space and culture, tripping over many times.

embrace (though awkwardly) urban culture by wearing stilettos and saree, learning spoken English and polite mannerism for the approval of her posh urban suitor. In contrast, Bilkis has disguised herself for professional rather than romantic purposes, thus challenging patriarchal conventions of Bombay cinema. Most films in the Bombay industry construct female characters whose entire look (more than their acting) is appealing. Most films tend to concentrate on women's makeup, hairdo, clothes, accessories, and sculpted bodies to such a degree that actresses are known to get multiple cosmetic surgeries.

On the other hand, Bilkis' tomboyish demeanor is purposefully constructed as she "stomps about in frumpy salwaar-kameez-dupatta, shod in worn-out keds" (Shubra Gupta). Her look ties in well with the decentralization of romance and unglamorous role of the female protagonist. The choice of Balan to act as the protagonist in *Bobby Jasoos* is suitable as she doesn't fit the industry standards and uses her image to "her advantage by putting on weight, wearing little or no make-up, wearing outlandish clothes, and strapping a prosthetic belly [in her previous films]".[21] Balan represents the voluptuous quintessential Indian woman—a counterpoint to the taller and slimmer contemporaries (Priyanka Chopra, Katrina Kaif, Kareena Kapoor, Deepika Padukone, and Kangana Ranaut) in an industry obsessed with casting former Miss Worlds, Miss Indians, and foreign and Indian fashion models "who preen, pose and expose, and serve as embellishment, titillation, and distraction" (Bose, 2014, p. 397).[22] She shares her body type with a sizeable portion of Indian women and wears traditional dresses that connect her to traditional and older generation of audience.[23]

Moreover, Bilkis' lack of sophistication in the way she carries herself is part of her rebellion as a female detective and against the stereotypical female protagonist in Bombay cinema and reflection of the changing notions of female roles for certain sections of the Indian society. In de-glamourizing the female character, the narratives negotiate general issues of traditional and postmodern notions of femininity and gender as well as local and global sensibility through the specific idiom of detective fiction genre.

The female detective — a product of post-globalized India

In the Bombay film industry, the classic and hardboiled detective genre is almost negligible except on the margins. In post-globalized Bombay cinema, the first detective film with a smart female detective was *Bobby Jasoos* (2014) who solves the mystery of three missing children, among other petty cases. This was followed by *Detective Byomkesh Bakshy!* (Dibakar Banerjee, 2015), a film based on a male detective from Bengali literature who solves the mystery of a missing chemist and a larger conspiracy unsettling his city.[24] There has been a slow emergence of adjacent forms of mystery genre such as thriller and police procedural in Hindi cinema in the last few years such as *Kahaani* (Ghosh, 2014) about a wife (Vidya Balan) searching for a missing husband; *Talaash* (Kagti, 2012) a cop solving the mysterious death of an actor; and *TE3N* (2016) about a grandfather investigating abduction and murder of his granddaughter while a priest and a cop (Vidya Balan) investigate a similar sounding case.

Because of the introduction of satellite television and internet (from 1990s) in India, audiences have access to home-grown and imported TV programming of the crime fiction genre especially police procedural and to lesser degree the detective subgenre, which is becoming "a staple of the filmic and televisual iconography in the Anglo-Saxon world underlying so much of contemporary culture" (Priestman, 2003, p. 2). Prior to liberalization, English-speaking Indian readers and TV audiences had access to print circulation and imported TV series

(1980s) on Doordarshan (the Indian national channel) of detective stories such as Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple and Indian male counterparts like Premchand Jasoos and Byomkesh Bakshy. Detective novels have been written in various regional languages for a long time, but rarely have they been adapted into screenplays for Bombay. In Bombay cinema, crime, violence and police have been common ingredients of the narrative which have been combined with melodrama, romance, action and comedy into a unique masala (formula) that defies the concept of a dominant genre. The newly emerging mystery or crime genre with a female protagonist in *Bobby Jasoos* is not a matter of coincidence but rather reflects the larger changes taking place in the industry and the society, which are worth a discussion.

The director casted Vidya Balan as the lead character based on various reasons. The actress has had prior success in unconventional roles in the industry such as *Paa* (Balki, 2009), *Ishqiya* (Chaubey, 2010)*, No one Killed Jessica* (Gupta, 2011)*, Dirty Picture* (Luthria, 2011)*,* and *Kahaani* (Ghosh, 2014). The success of her last two films made it easier "for other heroine led films that followed in Bombay cinema" (Press Trust of India, 2015). Increasingly, there are films that are driven by the female protagonist and *Bobby Jasoos* falls within this trend though the standard practice is still to use a male protagonist. In female driven films, "portrayal of women characters has become more complex in response to the interplay of global and local forces in popular Hindi films" (Anujan, Schaefer, & Karan, 2012: 110).

Off-screen, Balan has made choices that are different from her contemporaries. She entered into films when she was much older than her contemporaries as she took out time to complete her higher education. Unlike her contemporaries, Balan came as a film actress having honed her skills in TV programmes as a young artist. She and a few of her other colleagues have remained a star despite being married, which reflects the changing standards among viewers who would previously only accept a single woman. For Bose (2014, p. 397), Balan is a rare female star in contemporary Bombay cinema in the way she can deliver such a range of diverse performances. Simultaneously, other actresses—Deepika Padukone, Priyanka Chopra and Kangana Ranaut—have also begun to deliver consistently diverse performances as the market demands something fresh. Their range and degree may not vary as much as Balan who has acted shades of white, black, and grey in unglamorous roles. Bose (2014) points out that actresses such as Kareena Kapoor and Priyanka Chopra who do off-beat roles still do many more item numbers and other things to reinforce their glamour and beauty throughout their careers.[25]

> "*Bobby Jasoos* has no item numbers [vulgar song and dance sequence], no cheap thrills, and none of the usual trappings of a wannabe blockbuster" (Chatterjee, 2014).

There is a trend among a younger generation of actors and actresses to do roles that are different from their previous roles and to juggle between serious and small budget along with entertaining films and big budget stories which can sometimes be mindless entertainers. In comparison to her contemporaries (such as Katrina Kaif) most of Balan's films are not "mindless entertainers".

Various broader changes have also influenced the growth of female driven films such as *Bobby Jasoos*. In 1990, the hitherto disorganized film industry was given official status as an industry, which meant that

- producers could seek funding from new sources such as banks, venture capitalists and business houses;
- new technologies of production were imported and outsourced;
- new strategies of distribution including transmedia marketing and promotions were introduced;

- multiple exhibition channels emerged such as multiplexes (these are bringing back middle class audience into cinema halls and creating niche audiences but also pushing working class audience to home viewing via DVD and television due to higher theatrical ticket pricing);
- liberalization of the economy led to opening of the Indian airwaves;
- proliferation of digital platforms meant that films' music and broadcasting rights were purchased and revenue generation and exhibition platforms (such as private TV channels) expanded;
- mushrooming of well-funded Indian and international production houses;
- international collaborations that encourage new people with new ideas, skills and sensibility;
- "shifts in spectatorial tastes and practices" driven by urban audiences especially youth (Bose, 2014, p. 395);
- rise of new generation of directors, scriptwriters and creative talent that are risk-taking and create "substantive female characters bestowed with narrative agency" (Bose, 2014, p. 395);
- increasing number of women working in the film industry in different roles (such as editors, directors, scriptwriters, cinematographers etc.) other than the traditional roles assigned to them as actresses, choreographers, makeup artists, dancers and singers etc. This trend is reflected in the film *Bobby Jasoos* which is co-produced by actress Dia Mirza.

In terms of larger societal changes, there has been widespread migration to urban areas. With it, there has been increasing access to education and employment opportunities that have led to rise in the number of working women with disposable incomes and women participating in decisions related to choice of partner, domestic expenditure, children and other matters, as well as being part of decision-making processes at workplace. Private companies and entertainment industries cannot afford to neglect this section of the population and are increasingly focusing on women as an important portion of the consuming class. Since liberalization, Indian society has become very aspirational and *Bobby Jasoos* echoes this kind of aspiration through the aspirations of the female detective and her supporting characters.

> "It is not just a detective story, it's really also a human story about a girl from a small village in Hyderabad with big dreams and aspirations. It shows that you can actually reach your goal no matter where you come from or who you are" (Samar Shaikh).



First song and dance sequence of *Bobby Jasoos*. Bilkis shares her joy with others in the streets, dancing and expressing her joy in the lyrics.

The first song articulates these sentiments where Bilkis takes to streets expressing her joy and freedom, through a song and dance sequence, after she has received her first huge professional fees. She takes her family to a shopping mall for the first time, not ordinarily accessible to them because of their lower middle class situation. The detective genre and the Bombay narrative gives space to express a woman's choice for professional career and upwardly mobile economic lifestyle while reserves the right to express her cultural freedom in areas such as sexual desire. In the third song and dance sequence depicting a typical grand Indian wedding, the characters are happy and elaborately dressed against the backdrop of a customized marquee. Bilkis is teasing and dancing with Tasawur as others accompany them in the dancing, he clearly desires her but she does not express her desire and instead runs away from him. The songs, as Nijhawan (2009) says, express desires, aspirations, and lifestyles that the narrative does not and hence provide interesting ruptures. Bilkis' desire as a woman remains unexpressed, but in her evasiveness, she exercises agency by making the "male character await her pleasure".



In the first song and dance sequence, Bilkis visits a Dargah (a shrine built over the grave of a revered religious figure) to thank the divine for showering blessings on the day of Eid in the form of hefty professional fees.

This may not be as bold as in some other recent Bollywood films that express feminine desire such as *Astitva* (Mahesh Manjrekar, 2000), *Kamasutra: A Tale*

of Love (Mira Nair, 1996), *Queen* (Vikas Bahl, 2014) and *Margarita with a Straw* (Sonali Bose, 2014). However, it is definitely bolder than the female characters of many other films**.** Her eyes in the songs seem similar to the "dancing women's eyes that can be honest, direct and alluring, all at the same time" (Nijhawan, 2009, p. 107).[26] The characterization of Bilkis bridges the traditional and the modern as she remains within a patriarchal code of sexuality akin to a "traditional Hindu Goddess prototype", but she also aspires for professional expression and economic freedom akin to the marginalized, "Anglo-Indian" and "Westernized-Indian"female prototype without being excessively Westernized.

She is definitely not a globalized/Western prototype of the "Westernized-Indian" female characterization.[27] Culturally, she is positioned towards the "Eastern/glocalization" framework as characterized by film scholars (Anujan, D., Schaefer, D. J., & Karan, K., 2012, p. 115). Glocalization refers to the idea of having an Indian essence but being globally acceptable, for example, *masala chai* (Indian tea) served in a coke bottle to a local and international consumer. In the opening credits of *Bobby Jasoos*, the colloquial lyrics of the title song convey Bobby's courage to step into the male domain, posing her as Sherlock Holmes and James Bond's aunt, positioning her as a detective who has outgrown conventional tools (binoculars or weapons) as she has brains and intuition sharper than a computer. It stresses that Bobby is not just a local version of her international counterparts, but a better version. It's an assertion of gender but also pan-Indian racial identity in the context of perceived dangers of globalization. Glocalization is an answer to these real and imagined fears of homogenization. Bilkis and Precious are glocalized characters, and *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* are glocalized cultural products in the sense that they bridge "an older, patriarchal, feudal familial structure [with] new modern possibilities brought about by economic liberalization" (p. 113). Glocalized forms of "cinematic culture [are] designed to appeal to traditional tastes" but equally "affirm its functional equality and … pre-eminence … among other nations on the world stage" (J. Cullity as cited in Schaefer and others, 2012, p. 112).

Cultural geography of *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*

Unlike most of commercial fiction cinema and television that focus on posh cities, posher part of the cities, and even glamourize the underdeveloped parts or represent them as very dark, *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* have a nuanced representation of specific spaces and places which are located in a cultural context rather than decontextualized geographies. *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* is an unparalleled experiment, filmed on location in Botswana, offering an atypical African milieu "against the torrent of Heart of Darkness stories from Africa" (Michael Wines).[28] Avoiding the violence, disease, and poverty-ridden stereotypes of Africa, the McCall novels and TV series showcase Botswana as a politically stable and economically prosperous country abundant in natural resources.

> "In modern Africa, ridden by AIDS, destitution and dictatorship, very little is innocent anymore. But Botswana is as close as it comes, a haven spared many of colonialism's horrors and eased into relative prosperity and democracy by the wealth of diamonds and a history devoid (mostly) of brutality" (Michael Wines).

The TV series challenges popular perceptions by portraying a relaxed-paced country with polite people and the landscape as an important character of the narrative which is anything but ugly.

> "Apart from employing local actors (which might allay anxiety about the predominantly white production staff), the city itself expands and deepens to create the cinematic landscape of the TV series that lends a distinct sense of place. The women detectives pursue their case work and go about their daily lives as do others in the neighborhood and in their doing so, Botswana's dimensions and complexities continue to reveal themselves" (Alyx Vessey).



Bobby and her family observing sehri — communal eating in the early morning hours during the Ramadan period in their family house.

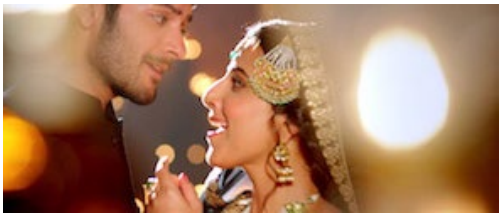
Bobby Jasoos also maps an untraveled cultural space in Hindi commercial cinema. The story is situated and filmed in the older parts of Hyderabad, the *de jure* capital city of Andhra Pradesh. [29] Very few Bombay film narratives are located in either the older or newer parts of Hyderabad which has a sizeable population of Muslims. In commercial cinema, most protagonists belong to majority Hindu community. Very few films are located in a Muslim community with a Muslim protagonist. The film shares a common thread with "multiplex" films made by new directors that narrate a universal story but are located in a specific cultural and geographical context of a semi-urban space.

A low-budget film, *Bobby Jasoos*, reflects the cultural milieu of a conservative Muslim family that observes customary practices during *Ramadan* (fasting period) such as 'roza' and 'sehri'—communally fasting and eating respectively. *Bobby Jasoos* strays away from one of typical Muslim characterizations such as a sidekick, a good hearted secondary character, a villain, or a national enemy. Scholars Chadha and Kavoori (2008) trace the trends in representation of the Muslim 'other' in Bombay cinema to three stereotypes which are absent in *Bobby Jasoos*: they are neither exoticized nor marginalized nor demonized. In other words, this film has no completely dark characters as most of them are different shades of grey.



In the second song and dance sequence, the old world, Nawabi (aristocratic) charm is recreated in the mise-en-scene with traditional costumes, Urdu pottery, romance and stylized lighting against the backdrop of ancient Islamic architecture, around Hyderabad.

The representation of the Muslim community is far from being exotic though in the second song and dance sequence, which is the only romantic rupture of the narrative, there is a loose acknowledgement of the old world and the tradition of Muslim social films. Tasawur realizes his feelings for Bilkis and imagines being with her. Unlike the rest of the narrative, she is dressed in a traditional feminine look found in Muslim socials (began in 1930s, flourished in 1950s & 1960s and lasted till the early 1980s) with makeup, hairdo, extravagant clothes, bejeweled and expressive face and subtle body gestures. He desires her and she teases him by letting him come close but running away from him. This representation of romance is reminiscent of films of yesteryear. There is nostalgia embedded in the mise-en-scene and cinematography of this particular song and dance sequence which transports the viewer to outdoor locations (location filming at Golconda Fort, Hyderabad) with old grandeur of the Islamic State reflected in the backdrop of ancient architecture, traditional costumes, soothing lyrics, unfolding romance and polished mannerisms of the characters.[30]



Tasawur imaging a closeness with Bobby though in reality she is running away from him in the second song and dance sequence.

But the narrative is less similar and more dissimilar from tradition of Muslim socials, which is a contentious term in itself.[31] The common thread is the focus on the Muslim community and location filming in the old Hyderabad with a sizeable Muslim population instead of its predecessor Lucknow as the favoured setting. Unlike the Muslim socials, *Bobby Jasoos* has less elaborate production values and mise-en-scene and uses colloquial language (Hyderabadi diction of Hindi) of the place. It steers clear from the sophisticated Urdu language, lifestyle of the upper class (Nawab) with its romantic relationships, and courtesans as the main narrative driver. Likewise, it doesn't depict a cultural period of decadence of idealized world or predominantly portray the social issues plaguing the middle class Muslim community. Though it represents the middle class and through the petty cases that Bilkis solves, the film does reflect the fissures and deceptions in the community. Landscape as place and space (i.e. Hyderabad) is an integral part



Filmed at night at the Golconda Fort near

Hyderabad, the earthy yellow lamps, soft focus, black and golden embroidered costumes, gentle gestures and mannerism emphasize the traditional idea of feminity and romance reminiscent of bygone era.

of the film *Bobby Jasoos* as it anchors and shapes the narrative. The plot constructs and negotiates the landscape, yet it is not a main character. This is unlike *No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* which combines interior shots with exterior in a way that develops the landscape of Botswana as an important character that develops just as the female detective in the narrative, thereby lending deeper rootedness to *No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* in comparison to *Bobby Jassos* and its hardboiled and classic counterparts.

Screen characters, Precious and Bobby are clever though not highly educated, brave yet vulnerable, compassionate without being naïve, and possess traditional values but also have a liberal outlook. Their experiences are insightful and simultaneously entertaining. They are positive role models in mainstream media for those who are seeking to find their own voice. Like Bilkis Ahmed and Precious Ramotswe, *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* are simple and straightforward stories that "reward our passion and appetite for mystery and thrillers without bringing all the concomitant rubbish of violence and cruelty," (Michael Wines). Mr. Minghella said of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* that "it's not about misanthropy in an ugly world [but] about venial sins in a good world" (Michael Wines).

Through their shared and disconnected borders with classic and hardboiled crime, *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* reframe the detective sub-genre of the crime fiction genre by celebrating a tolerant and compassionate worldview. The narratives articulate and negotiate issues of gender and intergenerational relations, notions of traditional and modern, local and global sensibilities, conventions and ruptures of genre and its subgenre. They are examples of works that create a simultaneous sense of similarity (stability) and dissimilarity (movement), which are "recognizably part of a tradition but also one that reinvents itself in unexpected ways" (Horsley, 2005, p. 16). As a result, the genre itself is renewed in response to changing times.

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Notes

1. Classic detective tradition is also labelled as "analytic detective fiction, the 'whodunit', the mystery story, the clue-puzzle story, all refer in one way or another to the basic structure of the sub-genre––to its characteristic pattern of death–detection–explanation. [...] Sherlock Holmes is, of course, the tradition's best-known father figure, and he has a vast number of descendants, each giving his or her name to a different series of stories––the Father Brown stories, the Hercule Poirot or Lord Peter Wimsey novels" (Horsley, 2005, p.12). [return to page 1]

2. "The hard-boiled private eye's self-conscious toughness and his aggressive involvement in his city's criminal milieu gave him a very direct investment in the world he investigates" (Horsley, 2005, p. 67). Horsley's study shows the writers of this subgenre offer a stiff response to the soft-boiled 'feminized' mysteries of the classic British tradition in terms of setting, language and gesture, plot structure, attitudes towards violence, the methods and motives of the murderer, the relationship between fiction and contemporary reality. "His [hardboiled detective] objective is to delineate a distinct form of detective fiction that he thinks is capable of capturing American experience in the early part of the twentieth century" (p. 79).

3. *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*'s pilot (144minutes) was written and directed by Anthony Minghella who directed the much acclaimed *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999) and *The English Patient* (1996). It was broadcasted posthumously on BBC One (23 March 2008). The remaining episodes were written and directed by other directors.

4. In the film, Bilkis' family is waiting for her to get married so that her younger sister can also get married.

5. Alexander McCall Smith is celebrating 16 years of writing the book series, *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*. The series has been translated into most of the major languages.

6. "The inter-war period (1920s) sees the flourishing of golden age, British crime fiction, epitomized by writers as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham and others. The mystery was set in the archetypal country house or London, crime within the restricted milieu of fashionable society. In either case, it took place in an *exclusive* setting. The enclosed community itself was the source of tensions, deceptions, betrayals, and death— this being the period during which murder came to be an essential part of the detective story. Numerous male writers contributed to the golden age (Anthony Berkeley [A. B. Cox], for example, together with U.S. imitators like John Dickson Carr, S. S. Van Dine, and Ellery Queen), and the detective figures themselves remain predominantly male. A period of highly stylized crime writing, it has also been labelled 'cozy', reflecting the preference for plots in which a comfortably recognizable pattern is acted out [...]" (Horsley, 2005, pp. 37 &51).

7. “At the time, women were debarred from most law enforcement positions and were unlikely to be found working as private detectives; they thus are also debarred from the world of the fictional private eye” (Reddy, 2003, p. 193).

8. This stereotype began to change forever with Amanda Cross’s first Kate Fansler book, *In the Last Analysis* (1964). This series’ debut coincided with the beginning of the second wave of the feminist movement, marked in the United States by the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. (Reddy, 2003, p.195).

9. Ms. Jane Marple was “an elderly woman of independent means in the tiny village of St Mary Mead. She seldom got credit for the mysteries she solved by the police”. Unlike Precious and Bobby, she was a lifelong spinster and her “lifetime of nosiness—which might also be called close observation—constitutes her special power as a detective” (Reddy, 2003, p.193).

10. The narrative of *Bobby Jasoos* plays with the idea of misleading the viewer in keeping with “the nature of a genre in which it is particularly true that the art of narrative is the art of misleading. One of the main means of achieving retardation of the plot is, of course, the inclusion of various possible culprits [...] as is the suspicious behavior of other characters” (Horsley, 2005, p. 26). In *Bobby Jasoos*, it’s the misplaced suspicion about the behavior of the chief-patron and client. Instead of finding Ali, in an unconventional manner, Bilkis gets suspicious of Khan’s motives and investigates her own client’s background to ensure that she’s not involved in anything unethical. Eventually, she finds Ali and also figures out Khan’s good intentions and clean background.

11. Bilkis, is a lower middle class woman and cannot drive. Her educated middle class counterparts will be more likely to have the opportunity to join the white collar workforce outside home and her upper middle class contemporaries will learn driving for other reasons. Bilkis represents the section of Indian society who do not have easy access to opportunities of a self-owned vehicle and a skill to use it. [return to page 2]

12. Doyle created Sherlock Holmes and McCall Smith created Precious Ramotswe. Both writers are Scottish and trained in natural sciences. They both became important writers of popular detective fiction, though in different ways—one as a symbol of classic detective male genre and the other as a symbol of retaining some elements but refreshing it with gender and cultural nuances of post-globalized times.

13. “Even the woman Holmes most admires, Irene Adler, his equal in disguise and in logical thought, is not allowed to put her obvious gifts in the service of detection” (Reddy, 2003, p. 192).

14. “Independent, isolated male protagonists, whether of the Sherlock Holmes or Sam Spade variety, may, of course, also have been orphaned at a tender age, but we do not really know—and this is the point [of difference]” (Horsley, 2005, p. 255).

15. She feels fortunate to have had a very supporting father who raised her well in absence of her mother and left his substantial wealth for her so she could live her life on her own terms. She was able to start her own detective agency in the city and buy a posh house from her inheritance.

16. With the exception of her breakthrough role as the eponymous *Parineeta*, Vidya Balan has been less compelling when portraying conventional romantic protagonists (Bose, 2014, p.398).

17. In the TV series, Precious declines JLB Matekoni’s marriage proposal a few

times before agreeing to it. She gently refuses the first time. Next time, they are interrupted by a client and the third time Precious is actively involved in both pronouncing and accepting JLB's proposal. In the novel, Precious declines once and then accepts the second time. While she wonders when a day for the wedding will be named, but she never puts pressure on her fiancé. These are creative differences between the written text and adaptation for audio-visual media. The important aspect is that the essence of the narrative is respected in the TV series.

18. Precious liberally indulges in homemade cakes, African bush tea, doughnuts and spending time with traditionally built ladies and thinks very little of those women who are desperate to become size zero. Precious has dieted once in the entire book series, only to give up for a fruit cake and bush tea. [return to page 3]

19. Acting with her eyes is unlike her contemporaries, but very similar to her predecessors of parallel cinema and black and white cinema of the 1950s such as actress Waheeda Rehman in director Guru Dutt's films.

20. Balan is not the only star who has to handle her physical appearance carefully amidst lot of criticism, rising male star Nawazuddin Siddiqui has revealed the prejudices he faced due to physical appearance which denied him opportunities to showcase his acting talent.

21. Vidya Balan (aged 37 years) of Tamilian descent, was raised in the metropolis of Mumbai. Prior to her generation, some of the most successful actresses of the 70s-90s were also Tamilian but they migrated from Southern India. Balan shares her body type with these actresses such as Rekha, Sridevi, Hema Malini and Jayaprada and others. In those days, their voluptuous bodies coincided with the idea of ideal femininity. In Balan's film *Dirty Picture*, she plays a sexy South Indian actress of yesteryears.

22. In films such as *Kismet Konnection*, Balan was awkward, self-conscious and clad in western wear, which according to fashion experts did not suit her body type" (Bose, 2014, p. 398).

23. She also symbolizes the small but growing band of outsiders (traditionally men) who are making it big in the industry which is controlled by certain families —for example Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Deepika Padukone, Priyanka Chopra, Irfan, Anushka Sharma, Ranveer Singh, Randeep Hooda. They represent the possibilities that the corporatization of Bombay cinema offers.

24. In an interview about the film *Byomkesh Bakshi*, the director Dibakar Banerjee said that the character is an Indian answer to Sherlock Holmes. It would be another research project to compare this film with *Bobby Jasoos* and *The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.

25. Though, after her international presence, Priyanka led the film *Jai Gangaa Jal* as a female cop with no frills and glamour element. But Balan has not taken the same path when she was a newcomer nor as a veteran.

26. But Bilkis' eyes are unlike the "poignant eyes of the traditional courtesan, transparent and loving eyes of the wife [and] desperate and manipulative eyes of the vamp" (Nijhawan, 2009, p. 107).

27. According to Anujan, D., Schaefer, D. J., & Karan, K. (2012, pp. 113-115) four roles have evolved in the cinematic representation of Indian woman: the traditional Hindu/Goddess Sita of 1950s, exemplified the ideal woman and wife; the marginalized Indian woman role, a relatively independent female character of 1960s who had violated the dominant patriarchal structure and, thus, suffered social stigma and personal anguish for transgressions; the Anglo-Indian role of

the 1990s was a non-resident Indian, chaste, upper class liberated, hybridized female protagonist; and Westernized Indian role, after the turn of the millennium, as an educated, modern, socially adept, and sexy lady playing a central rather than secondary role. She is a role model for celebrating global mass culture and consumerism.

28. The government of Botswana sealed the deal to make "The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" on location and not in a Johannesburg, contributing $5 million to finance it. In return, Botswana received not only the economic benefits of housing and servicing a major film but also hands-on training in moviemaking that officials hoped will sow the seeds of a film industry. Botswana is also counting on a tourism benefit from the film: The Kgale Hill set that includes Mma Ramotswe's office is being preserved and will become part of a "The No 1 Ladies' Detective Agency" tour for those drawn to Botswana by Mr. Smith's stories" (Michael Wines). They have also renamed the National Park in Gaborone after the author Alexander McCall Smith as it draws international tourists to the country.

29. "A lesser known fact is that the film also had an almost all-Hyderabadi cast. Sutradhar, a city theatre group, was approached for the casting of the film and had about 17 actors who got to act in a Bollywood venture, sharing screen space with Vidya Balan" (Sanchita Dash).

30. Muslim socials according to Chadha and Kavoori (2008, pp. 136-138) have certain features: the narrative is centered on the Muslim socials and issues related to it, limited terrain of lives of former aristocratic elites of Northern State of Awadh (Lucknow being the capital), subject matter was romantic relationships and family melodrama, *Shairi* (Urdu poetry), *Qawwali* (form of singing) and the *Tawaif* (courtesan), *Tehzeeb* (high culture), *Adaab* (formal manners), men in *Sherwanis* and women in *Ghararas* as 'Muslim' attire were the leitmotifs. Islamic architecture represented by domes, minarets and scalloped arches interspersed with glimpse of crescent moon acted as signifiers of the Islamic culture of South Asian subcontinent.

31. Director M.S. Sathyu who made *Garam Hava* (1973), called it [Muslim social] a skewed way to look at cinema. When there is no Hindu social or Christian social, how can there be a Muslim social" (Kumar, 2014).

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Motwane, V., Malhotra, V. & Kashyap, A.(Producers), & Bahl, V. (Director). (2013). *Queen* [Motion Picture]. India: Viacom 18 Motion Pictures & Phantom Films.

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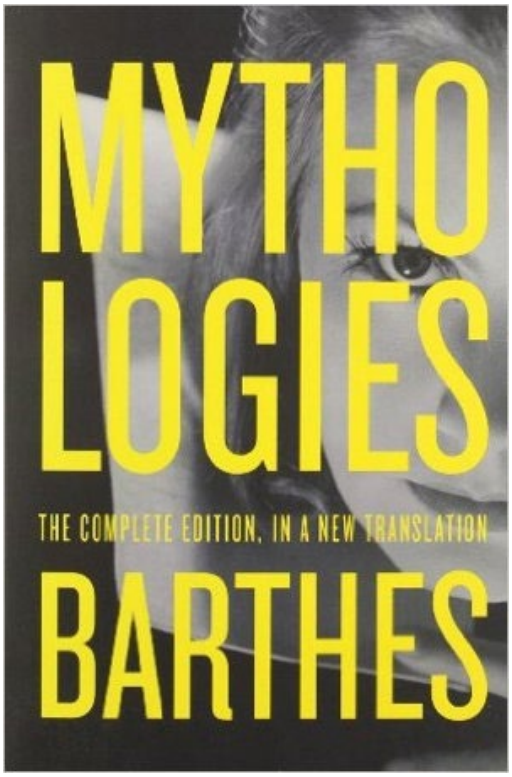
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Seeing ideology: a student guide to classics of visual media analysis

by Chuck Kleinhans

The remarkable progress of visual culture analysis in classrooms over the past few decades means that many young people have both a practical knowledge of image making and circulation, thanks to smartphone cameras and social media platforms, and a critical understanding of how to analyze everyday images. But for anyone wanting to gain a deeper analysis of still and moving images, it is worthwhile to return from time to time to some of the key works that founded the dynamic trend. I want to use this occasion to introduce or remind readers of the origins of visual culture critique.

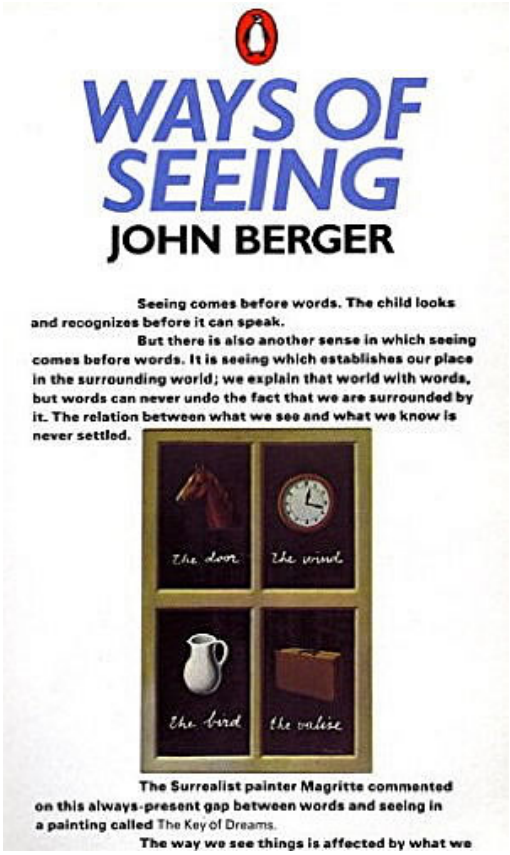
1. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

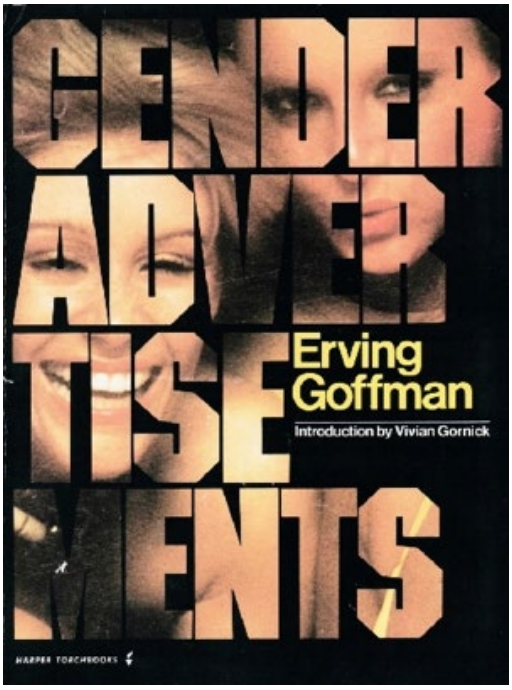
Barthes' 1957 book (English trans. 1972) collected previously published short essays on popular culture topics with an extended pioneering essay on semiotics, "Myth Today." Barthes explains that mass communication images have both a literal, direct, denotative meaning and a connotative one, essentially an ideological one. In his most memorable example, he discusses the cover of a French illustrated weekly magazine, *Paris-Match*, with the image of a young soldier saluting.



Paris-Match cover (click for enlarged version)

"And here is now another example: I am at the barber's, and a copy of *Paris-Match* is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolor [the French flag]. All this is the *meaning* of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors. I am therefore again faced with a greater semiological system: there is a signifier, itself already formed with a previous system (*a black soldier is giving the French salute*); there is a signified (it is here a purposeful mixture of Frenchness and militariness); finally, there is a presence of the signified through the signifier."





Lost in the displacement across national cultures and time, Anglophone readers often have missed what would have been obvious to the French audience of 1957. France was in a moment of crisis, having withdrawn from Vietnam in military defeat in 1954 and with an ongoing process of decolonization underway, especially in Algeria with a rising national liberation struggle. Thus the image of the young soldier balanced rather precariously on the historical moment. The caption identifies the fellow as from Ouagadougou (now the capital of Burkina Faso, then French Upper Volta) and thus makes him representative of a relatively peaceful and slow transition there. (Full independence was achieved in 1960 for the landlocked Central African nation.) And he can remain an image of loyalty to France in a time of insurgent warfare in Algeria. This magazine cover also has a resonance often ignored by Anglophone readers: the French model of colonization made colonial subjects French. School children in Ouagadougou would be doing exactly the same lessons as children in Lyon, Paris, and Marseille on the same day. Unspoken by Barthes (and unnecessary for a French reader in 1957) is this larger historical/political context: that is, it is what the reader brings to the image, not only to decipher what is seen but to frame it within "what everyone knows" or "what is taken for granted."

2. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*

British art critic John Berger's 1972 book summarized and extended his four part BBC television series of the same name. The best popular introduction to the core ideas of Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the book uses extensive illustration to make clear the way images must be understood in an historical and cultural context. Cleverly moving from "masterpiece" Western oil paintings through lithographed reproductions and commercial advertising, Berger shows the ideological underpinnings of art. Against the dominant art history's formal and aesthetic approach, Berger uses a historical and sociological critique to understand landscape, portrait, and the female nude painting in Western art since the Renaissance.

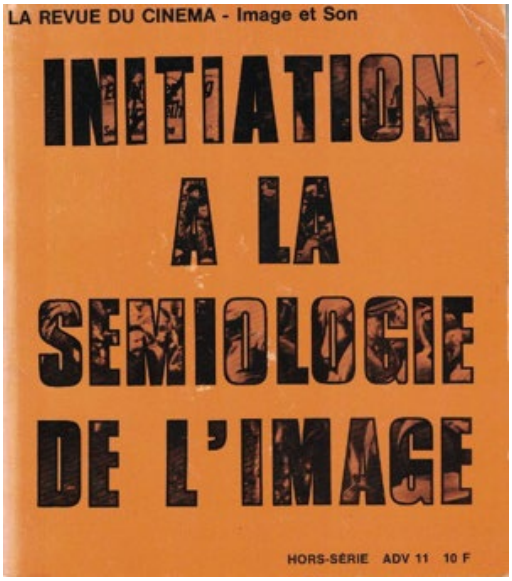
The hard-to-find original TV series includes a stunning and hilarious opening, tweaking the beak of solemn BBC presentations by pompous experts, and includes a ground-breaking roundtable with early Second Wave feminists on representations of women. Berger continued to write important essays on photography (and other visual arts) in books such as *About Looking, The Sense of Sight*, and *Understanding a Photograph*.

3. Erving Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*

This 1976 study by the brilliant sociologist of nonverbal social communication presents a detailed breakdown of how advertising presents gender norms as "natural." Richly illustrated with ads, Goffman explains how gender display is managed by framing, relative size, gestures of touch, function raking, the family image and ritualized subordination. The analysis cuts two ways: while ostensibly about the artifice of advertising illustration, it also functions as a critique of everyday home and workplace gender discrimination.

4. Guy Gauthier, *Initiation à la sémiologie de l'image*

A hard-to-find item, and in French to boot, Gauthier's booklet provided a clear and thorough introduction to image semiology. With an introduction by Christian Metz, it appeared as an out of series single item from *La Revue du cinéma: Image*

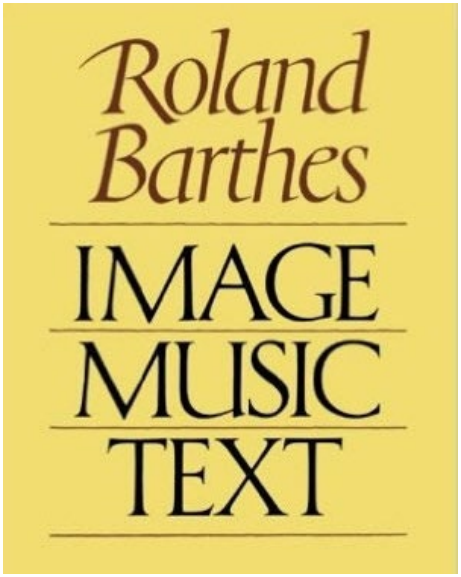


et son in 1972. Subsequently, parts of it circulated in an English translation accompanied by slides for teaching from the British Film Institute Education Department. That iteration seems to have more or less disappeared [I found one copy through WorldCat, in Australia.]

However, it remains a classic of clear analysis and thorough breakdown of images in mass communication, following the French tradition of very close rhetorical analysis. Gauthier methodically goes through the elements of images, image and text, advertising, publicity, how an image can become iconic, and how contrasting images of the same event or the same image in two different contexts can mean different things. Though the images analyzed were very topical c. 1972, once the argument is grasped, the general forms discussed can be easily applied to contemporary examples.

5. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Image" and "Rhetoric of the Image"

in *Image-Music-Text*: essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (1977).



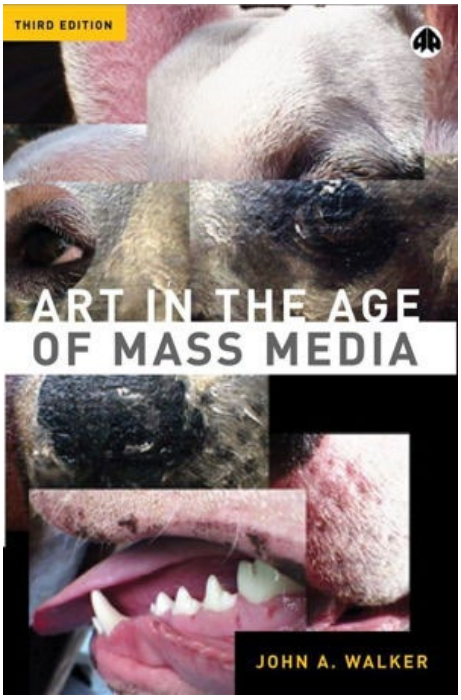


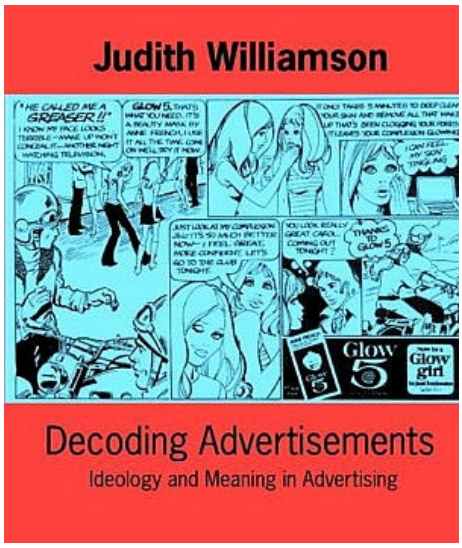
In two key essays from the early 1960s, Barthes extends his semiotics of the image. The first addresses press photography of news and the second deciphers advertising (in this case, for Italian pasta).

6. John A. Walker, *Art in the Age of Mass Media*

(London: Pluto Press, 1983)

Following Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, Walker's short book continues and updates the argument with special attention to modern artists who reflected on mass culture and mass reproduction in art.

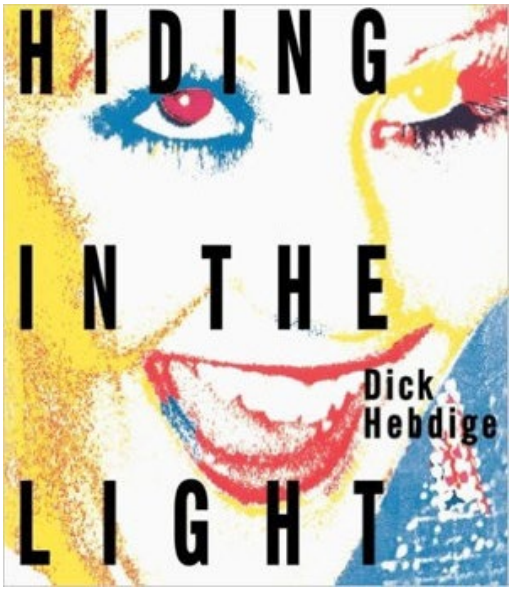




7. Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising*

(London: Marion Boyars, 1978)

In a more academic vein than the previous mentioned works, Williamson advances the argument with more explicit and feminist discussion using Althusser's concept of ideology and (modest) Lacanian psychoanalysis.



8. Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*

(London: Routledge, 1988)

Following on his landmark cultural studies book *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige collects heavily illustrated essays on visual culture, especially youth expressions in the UK. Throughout the 1980s British Cultural Studies work by thinkers such as Richard Dyer and Angela McRobbie pushed visual media discussion into new terrain.

9. John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photography and Histories*

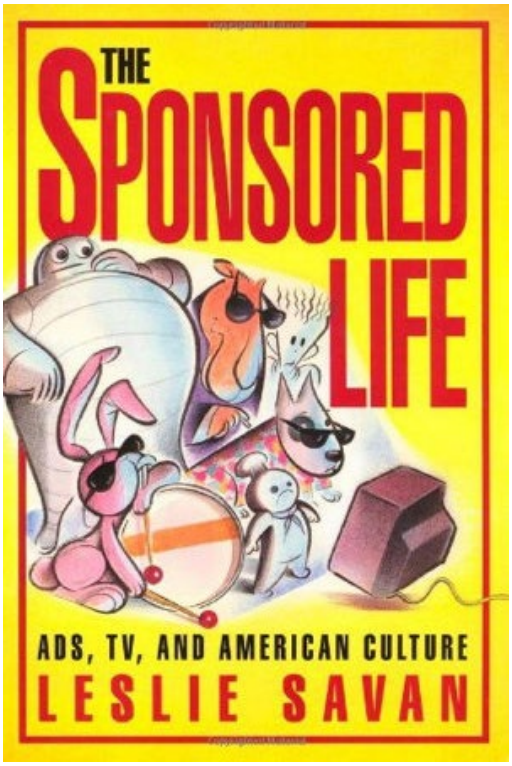
(Amherst, U of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

Tagg's historical investigation of photography underlined its contribution to surveillance and its way of framing political policies. This is a much more sophisticated discussion of photography expanded in the 1980s with many new voices joining in. The monthly periodical *Afterimage* from Rochester's Visual Study Workshop covered the field throughout the period and provides a useful starting point for surveying what happened.

10. Leslie Savan, *The Sponsored Life: Ads, TV, and American Culture*

(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994)

Advertising columnist for *The Village Voice* in the later 1980s and early 1990s, Savan wrote smart, short, and pertinent analyses of new TV commercials, advertising campaigns, and other parts of visual culture. (The essay on the

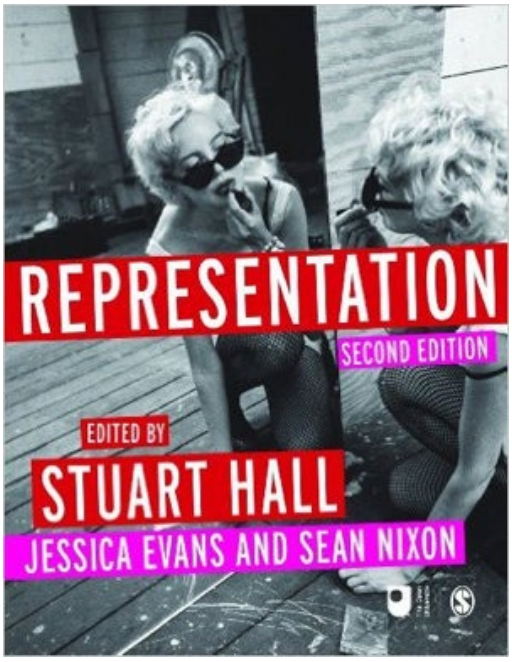


Helvetica typeface is a classic.) Skeptical of commerce, Savan questions implied and explicit racism and sexism in the ad world. The techniques and details of the ad business have always been endlessly and self-consciously discussed in the trade press (in journals such as *Ad Week* and *Advertising Age*; something missed by most commentators on the *Mad Men* series). Savan explains it for those outside the trade.

11. Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*

(London: Sage, 1997)

An excellent textbook on the subject, created for the UK's Open University. Hall's introductory essay and his chapter on racial representations are especially clear introductions to the issues at hand. Also pertinent here are two films based on lectures by Hall: R*ace, the Floating Signifier* and *Representation and the Media* (both 1997) distributed by the Media Education Foundation.



12. Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson, *Landscapes of Capital: Representing Time, Space, and Globalization in Corporate Advertising*

(Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2011.)

Examining how international neoliberal capitalism represents itself to the world's citizens, the book reveals an ideology in process as transnational corporations try to shape minds as they remake global trade. The book has a supporting website at www.landscapesofcapital.com See also: Papson's essay in this issue of *Jump Cut*.

13. Edmundo Desnöes, "The photographic image of underdevelopment"

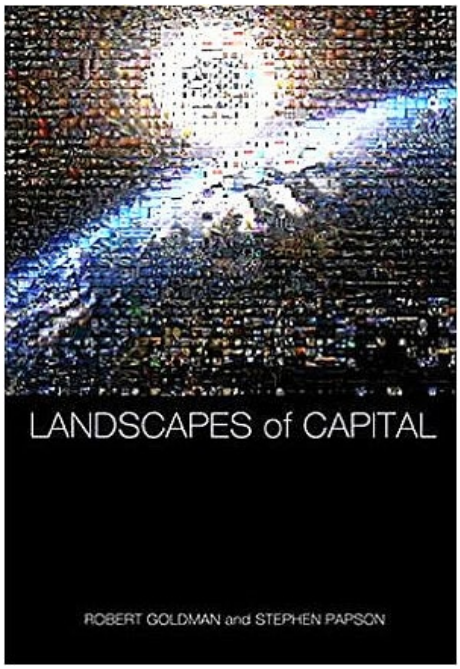
translated by Julia Lesage
from *Jump Cut*, no. 33, Feb. 1988, pp. 69-81
http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC33folder/photoUndvtDesnoes.html

In a classic 1967 essay, Cuban Desnoes presents a foundational analysis of how the developed world presents the developing world.

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I've bracketed out here visual studies of narrative forms, a topic worth taking up on another occasion. Most visual studies education begins with analysis of single still images. Of course, there are now extended lines of discussion regarding gender and race/ethnic representations. Ecology and environmental representation is another more recent development. Moving image analysis adds another layer of complexity. Visual image analysis is often implicit or explicit in treatments of certain perennial themes—such as images of war, or natural or human disasters—because of the comparison and contrast built into collections of images.

Recent technologies continue to change the field. The expansion of channels and platforms multiplies the presence and availability of images. Digital photography



and smartphones open the terrain. For example, the currently active U.S. media scene in television political satire (such as the *Daily Show)* often contrasts new statements by public figures with earlier ones that produce comic contradictions.

To top Print version JC 57 *Jump Cut* home

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Temporal subversion and political critique in Abderrahmane Sissako's *La vie sur terre*

by Elise Finielz

Part 1: Visual essay of *La vie sur terre*

Introduction

This essay is comprised of two parts. Part I is a visual essay closely analyzing the aesthetic and narrative aspects of *La vie sur terre/Life on Earth*. The images and captions presents the film chronologically illustrating and giving evidence for the arguments developed in part II. Part II explores the dynamic of temporalities at stake in this documentary fiction as it aims to resist a linear conception of history. It focuses on how the representation of time pertains to a political subversive narrative in order to capture the complexity of the everyday post-colonial state. Both part complements each other. [Click here to go directly to Part II]



The opening sequence of the film begins with an ascending medium shot showing ornamental ceramic ducks in a Parisian supermarket aisle. Dramane (short for Abderrahmane) is both protagonist and director of the film; he is revealed a few seconds later, among the ducks. This lighthearted opening shot suggests the absurdity of consumerism as he analyzes the products, pursing his lips with a rather comedic duck-like expression.



The next shot tracks over an array of butters and cheeses, accompanied by the busy sounds of the supermarket's cashiers and customers. This long tracking shot connotes overabundance, which later will contrast with the scarcity of resources of Sokolo, a village in Mali. After several shots showing the main protagonist walking through shopping aisles where advertising goods and sales tags stand out amongst the products, Dramane converses with a woman trying on a hat.

The camera then follows him ascending an escalator, leaving the store. He carries a polar bear, again a useless decorative object that will contrast later with the harsh and hot weather the protagonist will encounter (it also has a witty connection to Aimé Césaire's poetic line, "For a screaming man is not a dancing bear," recited later in the film). The slow motion image accompanied by the profoundly slow notes of an African lute



that has replaced the sound of the supermarket. The audio shift underscores Dramane's introspective and reflective thoughts.

This opening sequence, depicting an excess of material goods, stands in contrast to the scenes of village life in Mali: artificial neon lights versus Mali sunlight; a giant refrigerator versus the heat of the Sahel; an endless array of dairy products versus the little stalls of street merchants; an escalator versus bicycles, walking, and animal-drawn carts; the winter clothes that Dramane is wearing in France (brown overalls and a hat) versus the traditional colored African boubou he wears in Sokolo.

The nostalgic music of the African lute continues playing in this scene that establishes passage from Paris to Sokolo. The camera zooms in slowly on the branches of a majestic tree, a symbol of Africa. At the end of the zoom, the branches fill in the screen like a grand tapestry. The image fades to black over which the opening credits appear. The music then ceases and is replaced by the sound of the native land: cows, dogs, and the noises of the countryside. Zooming in on the branches metaphorically indicates the transition between two worlds: Europe and the village of Sokolo.



The branches are emblematic of a transnational connection. The horizontal zooming on the branches could be seen as a metaphor for Glissant's "devenir-rhizome" or a rhizomatic becoming in the world, representative of Dramane's migratory status. Their sporadic interconnectivity resembles a rhizome, an image borrowed by Glissant from Deleuze and Guattari that characterizes the Caribbean author's conception of a plural identity opposed to an unique "root identity"[1].[open notes in new window] Although Dramane is drawing upon Aimé Césaire most famous poem of the negritude movement, Dramane's return "to the native land" is a transitory one. He is not rediscovering his "African" roots and identity, but in a more contemporary way explores the cross-cultural dynamics and nomadic identities that thrives within the context of various cultures (Malian, Mauritanian and French).



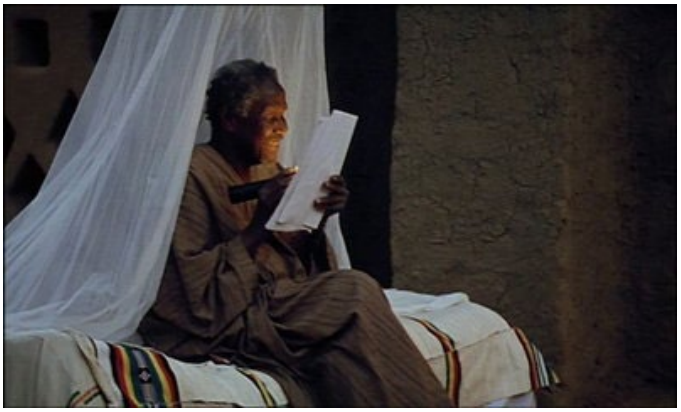
Such cinema privileges ellipses and repetitions rather than a beginning or an end. It seeks to explore "states of meaning" as "it brings into play different regimes of signs." It depends on a multiplicity of non-dominant and non-hierarchical configurations of representations. Instead of historical narration, *La vie sur terre* presents history "as a map" and not a "tracing"; in particular, it resists chronology or a specific time organization around the passage of the millennium.

In the next scene, Dramane's father is sitting on his bed covered by a mosquito net. Next to him, another bed with another net is empty, probably indicating his returning son. The camera slowly tracks in from behind and zooms in on the father smiling while reading his son's letter with a flashlight. Dramane's voice narrates as his father reads. Dramane's letter informs his father of an important change of plan: he intends to spend the turn of the new millennium with the father.

The passage to the millennium is the only chronological



reference in the movie, yet it does not constitute a plot device or a source of action. As Dramane mentions, after the millennium nothing will have changed for the better. It works merely as an excuse to fulfill a desire to film the village: “the desire to film Sokolo, the desire to leave as Aimé Césaire said.” The desire to film allows the exiled protagonist to put into words the experience of being exiled and the losses it entails.



In this scene, Dramane references for the first time Aimé Césaire and his most famous poem: *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*. Dramane establishes a clear link between the Martiniquian poet and his own film and personal story. The themes of exile and wandering are keys to Sissako’s works and in particular his first films. For his first documentary, *Rostov Luanda* (1997), portraying the situation in Angola after 20 years of a devastating civil war, he draws on a biographical and personal approach: the search for his friend from film school in Moscow whom he had lost track of for 20 years. *Octobre/ Oktyabr* (1993) and *La vie sur terre/Life on Earth* (1998) pose the question of returning home.

En attendant le bonheur/Waiting for Happiness, Sissako’s 2002 feature about migration, examines in depth questions of migration and offers extended reflections on relations between the European and African continents. Like Dramane, Abdallah, this film’s main character, is an uprooted individual, born in one country, raised in another, and on the verge of immigrating to a third. In transit in a city located in northern Mauritania, between desert and ocean, he is waiting patiently for a hypothetical happiness that he seeks in Europe.





During the voiceover of the letter, the scene cuts to a long shot of the field with boys chasing birds. Dramane is questioning the precarious condition of his own exiled status: “Is what I learn far from you worth what I forget about us?”

He reflects upon a life torn between here and there and the complexity of his in-between-ness. He is a foreigner in both France and Sokolo. What used to be a familiar place has become awkwardly more alien. The return always challenges the exiled

In the next scene, a pick-up truck loaded with luggage on the roof passes by on a dusty road. As the truck is driving away, Dramane walks toward the foreground in wide shot. It’s sunrise in a desert land dotted with a single palm tree. The sun is important in this narrative as time and activities in Sokolo are anchored in the course of the sun.

Dramane’s voice-over recites the poetic words of Aimé Césaire. The poet is first mentioned in the letter as an insight for the

to face the loss of familiar places of the past, and so the desire to return is always illusionary: “No return to the past is without irony or without a sense that a full return or repatriation is impossible. ”[3]

This image at sunset indicates that the film will evolve from the personal conflict of Dramane’s exile to the greater collective concerns of the village and Africa as a whole. Visually Dramane will progressively disappear from the narrative space giving precedence to the real threat that the village faces: famine caused by birds eating their crops.

The movie starts on an optimistic note: “The birds have gone, this is good news,” Dramane mentions in a letter to his father. However the presence of two boys shouting and swatting at the birds with a white flag indicates the birds’ threat is imminent and the villagers refuse to surrender. Indeed, the same image is repeated at the end of the movie. The birds have returned, indicating the situation is still not resolved and Sokolo remains on the verge of starvation.



The 60s and 70s generation of filmmakers, for example, focused more on questions of immigrants’ suffering in the former colonial nation. *Afrique Sur Seine* (1955), shot by the Senegalese Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, before decolonization, is considered historically the first African film. This film explored the question of suffering and alienation of young Africans in Paris, nevertheless in a constrained way since the filmmaker was denied the right to shoot in his homeland. *La noire de.../The Black Girl* (1966) from Ousmane Sembène, *Concerto pour un exil/ Concerto for an exile* (1968) from Désiré Ecaré, and *Soleil ô* (1969)*, Les bicots nègres vos voisins/ Black wogs your neighbors* (1974) from Med Hondo, all raise the same haunting issues: the representation of a Black body in a foreign environment, and the economic exploitation, and racial and social oppression in a place where immigrants do not have a livelihood and do not possess the cultural codes. ...

viewer to connect Dramane’s story to the poem, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, or at least assume the referential link. The landscape’s beautiful natural light and ochre colors complement the poet’s lyrical words and set up a loose relation of text to imagery. Such an associative link between poetry on the soundtrack and scenes of visual life defines Sissako’s aesthetic in this film. The loose relation between sound and image provides a wide latitude for the viewer’s interpretation of the meaning of the “events.” It also allows for the words themselves to provide imaginative images. Because of this suggestive rather than directive relation between sound and image, the viewers, in turn, may focus more at various times on either the image and/or the soundtrack.

> “Leave. My heart was bursting with fire and ardor. Leave. I will arrive fresh and young in my country and tell this country whose dust has penetrated my flesh...”

> “... I wandered for a long time. I now return to your hideous open wounds.”

Dramane’s father, as in the previous scene, is sitting on his bed. He is now holding Muslim prayer beads in place of the letter, patiently passing the beads along in prayer and awaiting his son.

Since Césaire’s foundational poem, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, the exile’s return home and consequent rethinking of his relation to his homeland has become a recurring theme in African postcolonial literature and cinema.

... In the 1990s, African Francophone filmmakers started to develop the theme of the return home to Africa, in the form of documentary (*Vacances au pays/ A trip to the country,* Jean-Marie Teno, 1990) or documentary fiction (*Bye-Bye Africa,* Mahamet-Saleh Haroun, 1998; *La vie sur terre/ Life on earth,* Abderramahne Sissako, 1998). Framed by an autobiographical narrative, a trip back to their country becomes an opportunity for the filmmakers to reflect personally on the situation of their homeland and more broadly on postcolonial Africa (a reflection on the state of cinema in Tchad in *Bye-Bye Africa*, a reflection on the passage of the millennium and what it means for the village of Sokolo in Mali for *La vie sur terre*; and a reflection of the illusion of modernity and the meaning of development in *Vacances au pays*). The exile reconstitutes new understandings of self, family, and environment, but the filmmaker also self-consciously uses the camera as a medium to allow a distant and critical perspective.



In a fixed shot, Dramane walks closer. He wears a shirt, white pants and carries a bag on his shoulder. The music of Salif Keita "Folon" starts as the lines of the poem conclude, giving a sense of continuity between poetry and music, and sustaining the element of nostalgia, cutting to ....



.... a long shot of cattle in a harshly lit desert ....



.... cutting to a reflection of a bike laterally passing across swamp water.



On the water after the bike passes off-screen, a wooden canoe transports Dramane and his bike in the opposite direction. Dramane appears in a colorful costume, indicating that he is no longer a traditional member of the community and brings with him a foreign or even touristy air. In most of the scenes throughout the movie, he is with his bike, which emphasizes his transitory state. With his bike, as with his camera, he is rediscovering the village.

As the boat transverses the screen, in voiceover Dramane reads Aimé Césaire's lines,

> "As I arrive, I'll say to myself: Beware my body, beware my soul. Do not fold your arms in the sterile stance of a spectator, for life is not spectacle. For a screaming man is not a dancing bear." (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land)*

As a filmmaker, Sissako conveys Dramane's realization of his exile status and his anti-colonial stance by harnessing them literally to the verbal force of Césaire's poetry. Césaire's landmark poem draws attention to the suffering of a people that have endured years of colonization and slavery, as he calls for collective emancipatory action. These same lines from *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* also appear in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* [4]. In fact, Fanon cites Césaire frequently in his book and hopes Césaire's work will inspire

In *La vie sur terre*, Dramane's return to a place that suffers is the motivation for his filming and raising awareness. However, the quote "a screaming man is not a dancing bear" implies that one may not exploit the suffering of others in a self-aggrandizing or sensational way. By filming his father's village, Sissako bears the responsibility for representing the people of Sokolo with dignity and respect. In this sense, it is important to notice that it is precisely Dramane who appears visually as we hear these lines: he becomes then an object of representation or "makes a spectacle of himself". By doing so, he redefines his own position to the village but also rearticulates his relation to Europe. Indeed, how should he film a familiar place that has become more and more distant? How should he film coming from France without subjecting Sokolo to an "exotic" gaze?

In Sissako's film, more than a convenient narrative device, the director's presence appears as a way for him to legitimately film the village of Sokolo. It appears to be a method or even a work ethic. His return is indeed not really represented. Dramane is suddenly there, most of the time riding his bike or with his father. In an interview about *Life on Earth*, a journalist asked Sissako about his "omnipresence in his movies": "Your omnipresence in the movies, is it a way to control them?" To that question, Sissako answered:

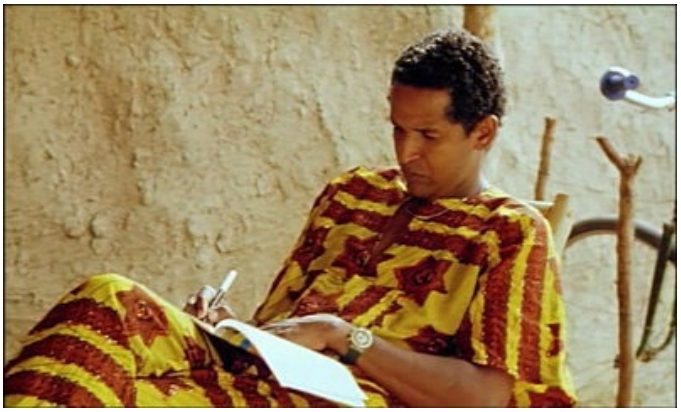
> "No, on the contrary; when I become aware of it (of the fact that I tend to control the movie) I feel uncomfortable, because it is not my intention; I will be less present in the future. In *Life on Earth*, it was only to be respectful to what I was filming. The

African and diasporic intellectuals in the future. These lines have also inspired the title of a more recent movie, *Un homme qui crie/ A screaming man* (2010) from Mahamat-Saleh Haroun.

topic was a return in a place where nobody films. I had to be myself an object." [5]



Parallel to Dramane on the boat, a woman (Nana, the main female character as the viewer will learn later) is riding her bike on a road by the water's edge, but in the opposite direction. The camera follows her as she passes women carrying buckets and a man with an umbrella. Her itinerary will narrowly cross paths with Dramane's in the rest of the movie.





In the next scene at his father's house, Dramane is writing in a notebook, his bike by his side. Although the viewer does not have access to what he is writing, his voiceover recites the letter he sent to his father announcing his return. He reemphasizes his desire to film Sokolo. Writing in a notebook reveals his affinity to Césaire and accentuates the introspective nature of his journey as he rethinks his relation with Sokolo to Europe.

Rejecting Europe and "its mad rush," Dramane aligns his particular story with a deliberate anti-colonial stance that builds explicitly on Aimé Césaire's literary works to stress the temporal and spatial divide between Europe and Africa. The colonial past still haunts the present. And the voiceover continues with a quote from "the poet": "Europe convulsed in screams; the silent currents of despair fearfully pulling itself together and proudly overestimating itself."

In a tracking shot, the camera moves from Dramane to a table full of books and a radio to his father. In this way the shot composition and camera movement establish an affective intellectual link and transmission of knowledge between Dramane and his father. Wearing glasses the father is reading in a dignified position (probably a book brought by Dramane), showing his receptivity to his son's studies. He does not speak in the film, but the voice of his son speaks for him, as does the voice of Aimé Césaire through a voiceover.



Nana, smiling on her bike, enjoying her ride in the sun, representing an answer and a contrast to Europe and “its mad rush,” an image that then…



…cuts to Dramane on his bike. His voice still recites the letter informing the viewer that he sent books to be read on the community radio (Radio Sokolo), which will appear in later scenes.



A fixed establishing shot of the village center gives the viewer a village perspective. It shows a photographer and men sitting in the shade of a tree listening to the radio while goats are crossing the street with a cut to…



…. a close up on the sign of the radio ironically named: “Colonial Radio, voice of the rice fields.” ….



…. This is followed by the radio presenter opening the program “the spoken library.”

Radio is the mass medium in Africa with the widest geographical reach and the largest audience, compared to other media such as TV, newspaper, Internet etc. At the end of the 1980s the development of private sector media accompanied the movements for political liberation, advent of multi-parties and legal reform.

Radio was seen as a tool of democratization and economic development [6]. In the year 2000, Mali had a thriving rural community radio-sector, with an estimated number of 121 community stations [7]. Broadcast in local languages, community radios reached a wide audience, especially in rural areas where people, for the most part, do not speak the official language (French), are illiterate, and do not have easy access to books. Radio is indeed an easy and cost effective source of information especially if, requiring the use of batteries, there is no access to electricity. Radio also mediates between written and oral language, as indicated in the title of the program, “the spoken library”; it offers a means of education, self-expression and communication, while also promoting the community’s history, music and oral tradition. Furthermore, community radio is accessible because it operates with minimal technological equipment and infrastructure.

For example, here the medium shot of the presenter, a recurrent shot in the film, displays a very basic recording setup consisting of microphone and transmission equipment. Through a gesture to the technical assistant, the presenter starts a jingle of Kora.

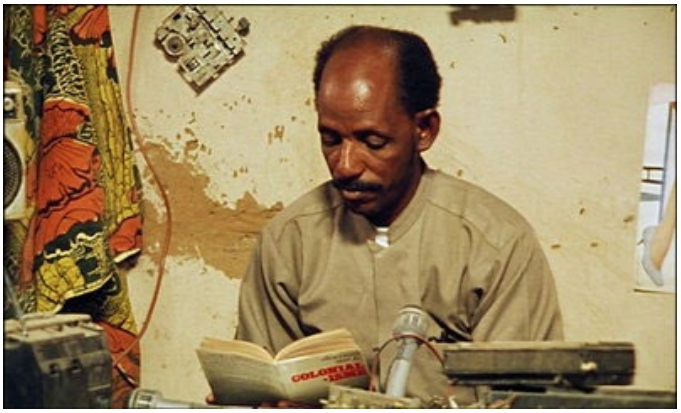


Farmers on little donkeys walk in sync to the light melody of the Kora, an instance of sound editing that connects successive shots together.



Another medium shot on the sign “Colonial Radio, voice of the rice fields” cuts to the presenter while he is introducing the reading of the day, an excerpt from Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950). The audience, according to the presenter, might not know this particular work but knows the author (“our Martiniquan brother Aimé Césaire”) which places emphasis on the high recognition of Aimé Césaire in Africa (and maybe implying that it is not the first time that they read his work on the program).

As a European voice recites the passage the radio presenter chose to broadcast from Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism*, it is implied that this work is a foundational text of anti-colonial and postcolonial literature, an irrevocable critique of European colonialism and their “civilizing” mission. *The Discourse on Colonialism* complements the themes developed in the Notebook. “Europe and its mad rush,” as broadcast by the community radio, in turn counters French International Radio.



While the passage is being broadcast on the radio, the presenter himself silently reads the books brought by Dramane, so that the scene integrates auditory and visual aspects of reading.



In the meantime, Dramane and another man are at the bike repair shop and seem absorbed in the radio book reading.



The next shot is of village merchants behind their table. The camera follows the airwaves; there is no causal effect between two shots; the sound is what links them. The radio serves to connect the images.



The camera then cuts to the post office while the audio continues reciting Césaire. Here again Césaire's text playing on the soundtrack in the background through the radio gives another meaning to the man waiting. He, like Dramane in the previous shot, seems absorbed by Césaire's speech; the coincidental shot (of the man in front of the camera) provides another resonance with Césaire's speech as applied to the scenes of daily life.



While the woman is on the phone announcing the arrival of Nana, a low angle shot of a radio antenna alludes to the difficulties of communication from village to village by phone. One of the themes of the film, the village's isolation, embodies Sissako's larger commentary through Césaire's discourse that communication with the rest of the world is made even more difficult, as Europe turns a deaf ear to the plight of Africa.





Nana is on her bike. The camera films her from left to right. As she appears in the frame of a broken wall, she slightly veers her head and enticingly rings her bike's bell. The camera pauses while Nana is continuing her ride. The frame remains empty for a fraction of a second until Dramane also appears (from left to right) in the frame trailing behind her. Then a panoramic view reframes placing the two characters, Nana and Dramane, in the center of the shot. Dramane might have accelerated his ride to join Nana. But the absence of perspective and the pause in the tracking shot create a light suspense; the film lightly sets up a possible atmosphere of romantic pursuit. Dramane brakes in front of her and they start what appears to be a cordial and slightly flirtatious conversation.

Dramane is in the village of his father. But he is also a foreigner, living in Europe and coming back just for a little time. Nana is from the next village. She is staying at her aunt's home. Both outsiders to the village, they are mainly filmed in motion on their bikes; they create curiosity in the eyes of the inhabitants of Sokolo. Their foreign status also serves to heighten the significance of exterior relationship to the village at a local and global level.



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Visual essay: *La vie sur terre* (continued)



Nana is at the tailor. Her image appears again framed by the tailor's entrance as she is being measured for new clothes. A close up shows her smiling as she glances at the camera or potentially the photographer peering in from a long reverse shot. The image carries its own mystery. The viewer must decipher the meaning.



Here again one could see the director's stylistic method: He does not impose meaning and modes of representation upon what he came to film. He raises questions and promotes thought rather than give interpretations or answers. The scene features a rare close up that captures Nana's beauty and seduction, maybe an answer to Césaire's line, "to your hideous open wounds."



Indeed, the director's choice to privilege medium shots and wide angle shots as opposed to close ups is to respect a certain distance, not intruding upon the intimacy of the village life. Visually he observes from a distance and lets various movements (bikes, animals, people walking…) enter the camera's field of vision. The photographer in the following shot is combing his hair and grooming, perhaps as a response to Nana's smile or in preparation for his day's work.

Women pass by tranquilly on donkeys from off screen followed by a lumbering man. The live sound of the village establishes the slow pace of the daily rhythm. Just as a man walking and listening to a radio on his shoulder, the sound of the radio transitions to….



...the radio station and presenter, who has a guest speaker that will later talk about the dilemma of birds eating the village crops. The guest speaker looks around slightly which brings the camera to a close up: a poster of the British royal family that seems out of place amongst old broken radios hanging on the wall. The sound of a plucking stringed instrument then leads to....











.... a high angle wide shot that moves from the radio station to the main village square. The shot is of a photographer and men sitting in the shade of a tree listening to the radio while farm animals are crossing by.

This wide-angle shot and fixed image allows emphasis on the village's movements. It shows the movements of Dramane ....



... and Nana who missed each other cycling through the village square. It shows movement of goats and cattle and some people, contrasting with the immobility of others: men sitting in the shade of an overhanging roof built of straw.

A temporal rhythm is set up for the film. The film progresses in close communion with people's daily life in public space in the Malian village, dominated by a certain sense of drowsiness, yet also filled with the normal village movement and activities.



The following scene creates a whimsical atmosphere of comical misunderstanding: a man and the photographer are conversing holding a magazine and seem to comment on a “beautiful Japanese” woman ....



.... which a close up reveals to be a car. Daily life provides the viewer with a bit of lighthearted comic relief.



In the next scene, the camera captures Dramane in an everyday routine, in an outside bathroom. He appears suddenly from behind the mud wall, shaving.



Nana is riding her bike in a street of Sokolo. She is smiling and dressed in her new outfit. The scene is quite familiar; the viewer is now accustomed to seeing Nana on her bike riding in the village. But it is also slightly different for the mise en scène. She rides toward the camera, suggesting the idea of a destination in a rather narrow street.



Nana stops in front of Dramane who smiles as he sees her. Nana enters the frame. They initiate a conversation, first starting with traditional greetings and moving on to a more intimate interaction. The setting reinforces the sensuality of the scene: Dramane’s chest is both completely exposed and at the same time concealed. The disposition of the scene, a wall separating the two protagonists and concealing Dramane’s body, creates a sense of discrepancy but also opposition: Dramane is placed a



Under this coincidental and traditional mutual ceremony of greeting, a seduction scene is taking place. The dialogue also reflects ambivalence, as Nana does not want to reveal where she lives, nor is Dramane prepared to meet her somewhere.

A close up of the mirror gives a subjective sense to the scene: the camera takes Dramane’s point of view. However the exchange of

little higher in the image and Nana is slightly below. Dramane is limited in his movements by the wall and shaving, whereas Nana on her bicycle is likely to depart at anytime; Nana is very well dressed and Dramane is half naked with his face covered in lather.

looks is mediated by a mirror, in which the viewer can see Dramane's reflection. The indirect camera-view of the actor-director, even if he is looking at Nana and not at the viewer, creates a layered and elaborate image of different perspectives that unfold in sobriety and simplicity.





Back at the post office, the phone rings, and the traditional soundtrack string music starts playing. A certain Marie is calling from Paris for Dramane. The postmaster asks her to call back in 10 minutes.

Someone is buying a cigarette from the street merchant. The radio is on and the presenter informs the listener that he has to stop the program: "I have to end our program now. It's time for me to return to my duties: chasing the birds." This reveals that the presenter is a volunteer on the community radio, further emphasizing that it functions on limited and unstable resources.







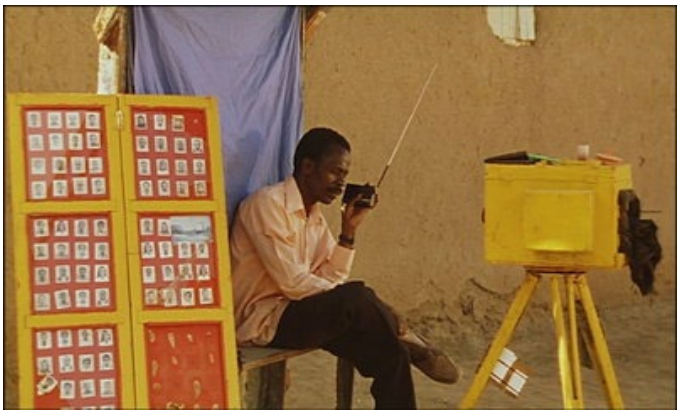
After a few shots in the radio station, the next scene changes to a fixed shot of a little boy (seen previously at the post-office) playing soccer. Like the previous scene with Nana on her bike, the camera is fixed and the little boy is coming toward the camera. The traditional music from the radio plays, establishing continuity. The boy's soccer ball is hitting Dramane's father's bed. The simplicity of the scene results in a coincidental action, that sets up a subplot between the characters. Such sobriety and sophistication within the setting, like the whole movie, are seemingly part of an intended formal simplicity, but these coincidental actions also create profound and elaborate layers of representations open to the viewers' interpretations.

Back at the post office, the International French Radio broadcast announces that the new millennium will occur in 14 hours. The message on the radio and the images of daily activities in Sokolo

create a disjunction between the peaceful village life and a distant Europe that is invisible yet omnipresent. The temporal tension (where are we going to be in 2000?) is subverted within itself. Inhabitants of Sokolo are not expecting great change at the passage of the millennium.















The camera tracks from men sitting listening to International French radio, to the photographer, to merchants by the tree, and finally to a donkey carriage and Dramane on his bike, as the radio continues to describe the celebrations of the millennium in

Paris:

> “In Paris, thousands are expected to attend local dances and fireworks displays. Huge crowds are expected at the Eiffel Tower. For 1000 days, it has been counting down to the year 2000.”

The only countdown in the village of Sokolo is a barrel falling off a donkey cart.





Men are drinking tea, listening to the radio. The recurring shot is from a slight and subtle variation of angle. Nana again passes by, creating curiosity as some of the men turn their heads to follow her ride.



Dramane is at the post office and could not return his call to Marie in Paris. If news from Paris reaches the village, the return communication does not seem to function: “It’s hard to reach people. It’s a question of luck,” remarks the postmaster, as the film insists upon the coincidental aspect of communication.



In the next scene, the photographer is taking a picture of a woman and the soundtrack of traditional music begins. Dramane rides his bike in the background. The following shot is a frontal view of the women that corresponds to the photographer’s perspective. His camera, an old yellow model, can recall “the lumière box camera” evoking cinema’s origin [8]. [open notes in new window] The photographer’s old camera participates in the various plays on reflections, mirror images, and frames within frames that occur throughout the movie. ....



....These different layers of representations or mise en abîmes create an ambiguity and frustrate the idea of authenticity as they destabilize meanings of representations. Often these compositions underline the contrived aspect of visual representation. Like the radio, which chronicles the daily life of villages or capitals, the photographer also captures an image of the village reality: he participates in the mediation between reality and its reflection, and he contributes to the unstable genre of documentary fiction. [9]



In this shot, the mise en abîme reaches a third layer as the camera and photographer are filmed through the hairdresser's mirror. The noise of the scissors accompanies the background music. ....



.... As Nana passes on her bike, seen in the mirror, the camera turns to the hairdresser from where the noise of the scissors originates. The hairdresser is following her passing on the bike reinforcing again the men's seductive curiosity towards Nana.



A villager voices in Bambara the problem of the birds eating the rice crop and political authorities' indifference and lack of action. Men sitting by the wall listen to the broadcast as the shade decreases. Back at the radio, the presenter acknowledges the complaint.



Back at the post office, communication is still not working. A man is trying to call a store.

The next scene is comprised of different shots in and around the village linked together by the stringed instrument as the sunlight declines. The repeated long shot of the men moving their chairs into the shade re-emphasizes the impression of slowness and progression of time. There is a tracking shot of Dramane on his bike, followed by a wide angle shot at the river outside the village. The successive images give a sense of harmony between the village and its surroundings. The space is harmonious and much goes on within it in an integral flow of activity. The constant movements and animals connect spaces within and outside the village. No areas seem inaccessible, protected or forbidden. Only the birds threatening the crops serve to counterbalance the harmony of the integrated landscape.











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Visual essay: *La vie sur terre* (continued)



At the post office, the close up on the sign, “Le telephone pour tous c’est notre priorité”/ “Telephone for all is our priority” ....



.... seems ironic as the same man is desperately trying to reach his interlocutor.





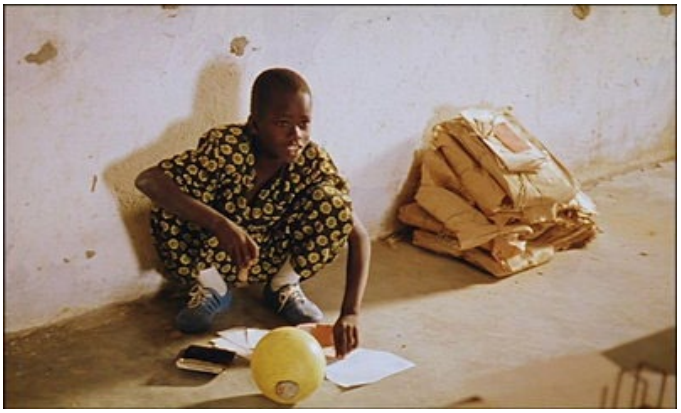


The next scene is also a repeated scene with slight variation of mise en scène: a man is being photographed in a traditional blue costume. This is almost a frontal shot: He is not looking at the photographer’s camera but toward the filmmaker's camera, a repeated “mise en abîme”.

The image of the man being photographed appears in the mirror of the hairdresser who is leaning on the wall, waiting for clients, and the recurring sound of his scissors. The day is going by...



Nana is at the post office. Shot like the other clients at the desk, she does not have any success in making her phone call in spite of all the good will of the phone attendant to reach her interlocutor (a certain shopkeeper, Baï).



The little boy appears there smiling with his ball and playing with the stamps of the post office.











As the day goes by slowly, halfway through the movie, a very rhythmic percussive music enables the viewer to rediscover the village in a somewhat new momentum. The music creates an upbeat portrayal of village life. After a long shot of the men seating by the wall, and a man passing by, a particular scene of a daily routine is revisited. Like Dramane a few scenes earlier, a man appears suddenly behind a mud wall, while scrubbing his face. The image cuts to a little boy dancing to the rhythm of the music. Then, the man appears washing his face from a side angle. He is covered with soap and Dramane arrives on his bike to talk to him. A radio is placed on the mud wall.



As the friendly discussion ensues regarding a local fair, the camera cuts to a little girl dancing towards the background and then forward to the rhythm of the music. Dramane's departing on his bike leaves the scene empty that then cuts to...





... Nana jovially riding to the fair, ringing her bell as she moves through the market stands. The music fades into the live sound of the fair transitioning to ....



.... the merchants and the photographer under his camera hood and the same client amazed as he describes the technological advancement of an elevator door in a light hearted manner. Viewed from the village, modern technologies take a comical aspect, while still generating wonder and amazement.



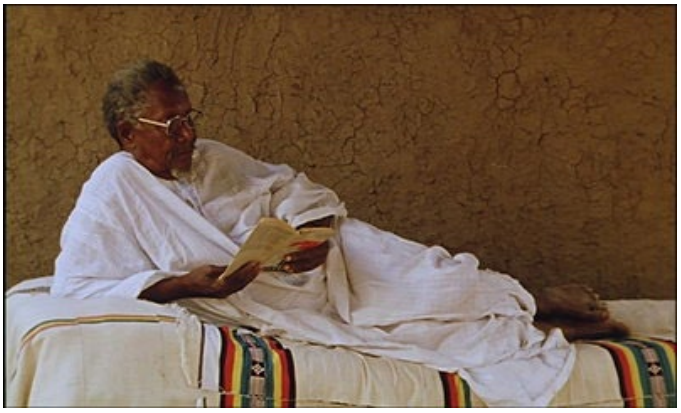


The next scene sets a more dramatic tone. The prophetic and visionary words of Aimé Césaire are accompanied by a lulling and melancholy piano soundtrack and the image of a desert. Dramane is riding his bike outside the village, while his voice recites,

> "And here, at daybreak's end is my manly prayer. May I hear neither laughter nor shouting. My eyes are fixed on this city whose beauty I foresee."

The camera then cuts to a long shot of a woman drawing water from a well and a large populated street full of dust. The light is declining and shade appears more abundant.

> "Give me the wild faith of a witch doctor. Give my hands the strength to sculpt. Make my soul a steely sword. I will not slip away."





A tracking medium shot captures the father lying on his bed reading a book with his glasses. We hear Dramane's voice as he continues reciting Césaire's poem. This is a repetition of the scene at the beginning of the movie, dramatized by the piano establishing a now nostalgic and weary atmosphere between Dramane and his father.

The camera pauses on Dramane writing in his journal and then back to his father reading *Discourse on Colonialism*. This scene again invites the viewer to engage in a meditative and reflexive moment.

> "Make me a rebel to vanity, yet docile to its genius like the fist of an outstretched arm."





There is a close up on the table with the radio, different books and magazines, a photograph of Aimé Césaire as a young man, and a newspaper entitled "A True Memory." Césaire's image as it appears physically in the movie will be recognized by those who know him; here it is placed among the different books and magazines about the men of Sokolo and the Republic of Mali. This shot reemphasizes the importance of books in the movie. It also establishes a link between Aimé Césaire's contribution to historical accounts of colonialism to analyzing the present situation of Sokolo and Mali. In this little intellectual "still life," Sissako, in turn, pays homage to Aimé Césaire.

The shot returns to the photographer and the village square while Cesaire's words continue and give another perspective on village life. The light has declined. The piano music is still playing, slightly intruded upon by the sound of a motorcycle and the voice of Dramane.



We hear Césaire's words in a voiceover, "Make of me the creator of high works. The time has come to gird our loins, like valiant men." The scene cuts to a tailor getting his second wind and starting his sewing machine as if to allude to the work ahead.





The universal message of Aimé Césaire's poem is illustrated by various wide-angle long shots of the village at dusk, Dramane on his bike, Nana on her bike, a person looking away from the camera contemplating the landscape, and men walking in the declining light through the rice field.

> "But in doing so, my heart keeps me from hate. Make not of me the spiteful man whom I despise. If I confine myself to this unique race, you know the tyranny of my love. You know it is not hatred of other races that makes me the plowman of my own. What I want is for universal hungering, for universal thirsting."

In this particular quotation, the use of a poetic "I" proclaiming to be "the plowman of this unique race" reveals the messianic role of the narrator to elevate humanity and build a society without racial differences. This prophetic annunciation of a new era gives a new metaphorical dimension to the village.



Césaire's prophecy of a future already inscribed in the present appears on a sign that reads, "My ear to the ground I heard tomorrow pass."







The International French Radio broadcasts the return of the sun in France and the end of cold weather, news that appears out of place in Sokolo, a place of constant sun. Nana is having her portrait taken. In the meantime at the post office, a military official is trying to reach army headquarters to no avail.



A close up of Nana reveals her broad smile that changes to a serious unsmiling pose.



Here the repetition of the scene creates an unexpected outcome, showing Nana in a new light.



Back at the post office, there is no climax of events as the “G-



We are left with an image of the empty desk as the International

spot" is unavailable. The officer is still having no luck reaching the military headquarters. The phone attendant repeating in French, "Hallo le point G" (an abbreviated form of the military headquarters) with an unintentional sexual reference creates a double entendre of comic relief. Marie fron France calls back but has missed Dramane. The main postal worker tells her that the sun is their worst enemy as a reminder of the harsh climate conditions in Sokolo. He underlines the indifference of France. He generously offers to get Dramane, sets the phone down and leaves the room. The little boy with the ball appears at the post office desk laughing, creating another comedic effect.



The movie takes a dramatic turn with a soundtrack of a violin. The postal worker walks with his crutches toward the camera in fixed long shot by the well in the declining sun. It's a predicting sign of "this hobbling life," a comment by Césaire that will occur later in the film.



After a tracking of the boy playing in the street with the ball, Dramane again appears on his bike. Nana is at the post office, and the attendant offers a solution with different options of cross-transferring a call so that she may reach the person she was previously unable to contact. Out of the four options, she chooses the optional cross transferring method. This rather complex system illustrates the way people adapt in uncertain circumstances.

French Radio starts again in the background. Ryako Suketomo in Tokyo sends her wishes, "Life goes on even if the century changes. Be Zen! Happy New Year!" This is as a lighthearted jest to Marie, who the viewer assumes might be growing impatient waiting on the line.



Back at the photographer's studio, an image of Nana is developing and in the photograph, she appears sad. This coincidental image provokes the unexpected or subverts our expectations as a villager comments, "I didn't know she was so sad."



Men are standing to escape the sun, holding their radio. A soundtrack of a Schubert Quintet announces a dramatic and emotional situation to come.

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Visual essay: *La vie sur terre* (continued)







A cut to the post office, the attendant desperately repeating "Sokolo, Sokolo, Sokolo" draws attention to the larger significance of Dramane's filming in an attempt to reach the outside world. A military man is passed the call yet loses connection.

The camera cuts to a medium shot of Dramane's bike and a hat indicating his presence in the home inside this doorway. Though he will not be seen in the following shot that focuses on a family, his camera works as the intermediary as a letter is dictated outloud by a poor man to his relative living in Europe pleading for assistance. A medium shot of that man and his wife and children in the background transitions to a close up shot of his face. One of the rare close ups of the film serves here to emphasize his subjectivity and the emotional turmoil as a result of his present-day situation, exemplary of what is happening in Sokolo. His words are sharp and irrevocable, and highlighted by the Schubert's music.

> "Dear Brother,
>
> I received your letter along with your gifts. They made us very happy. Dramane's return is a good opportunity for me to write back to you. This year has seen problems on the land and on the fields. The price of water and upkeep has almost doubled. It has been hard to bear. If you send nothing, I don't know what will become of us. Life in the bush is only possible with assistance."

Through the intimate communication conveyed to his brother, this letter addressed from the South to the North, exemplifies and elaborates the themes framed by Césaire's writings into the millennium's context: the economic inequities of globalization.

The message reveals a continent dependent on the assistance of their relatives living in Europe or of foreign aid. Colonialism has lead to massive unrest and poverty, unbalanced economic trade and the most undemocratic forms of governance. Its haunting effects are still prevalent today, as a result of the inaction of governments coupled with reforms imposed by the international institutions such as IMF and the World Bank (an issue that will be tackled by Sissako in his feature length film *Bamako*). People, strangled by mercantilist capitalism and exploitation, can barely survive as small farmers. The man's words of despair echo the *Discourse on Colonialism*.









A shot of the tailor (who is the man dictating the letter to his relative) working busily at the sewing machine in the frame of the door cuts to a close up of the tailor concentrated at work and his wife attending to the baby. The voiceover of the letter being dictated continues,

> "There is also the problem of medicine. Life is not without its illnesses. As head of the family it's my responsibility to seek help, we send our gratitude, thanks again. There's nothing like being able to lend a hand. If we don't help each other, the family cannot prosper."





The scene cuts to a motorcycle travelling down the road, creating momentum as violin music commences in the desolate village, which cuts to the little boy with the ball and a young child traveling up the road. On the soundtrack Aimé Césaire's words



echo the letter from the tailor,

> “And so I came. Once again, this life hobbles before me. No, not this life… This death… This senseless, merciless death, this death in which grandeur comes to naught. The devastating pettiness of this death hobbling from one pettiness to the next.”







A procession of men, coming toward the camera, are walking in the street of the village as villagers remove their hats in a sign of respect and only the sound of their feet are heard. The relatively short shots of this sequence contrast with the usual long shot of the village, expressing a sense of emergency. The scene cuts to …..



…. a close up of Nana sleeping on the countertop at the post office, waiting for the phone call. She barely opens her eyes at the sound of the procession. The scene cuts to a little boy seen from behind who looks back at a little girl seen earlier dancing. The sound of men walking in the street continues.

A phone call then wakes up Nana, but it is not the one she is waiting for. She goes back to rest her head on the counter, which evokes a sense of further despair and lethargy.



The procession of men continues outside with a traditional wind instrument and slow percussive drumming that accentuates the dramatic tone and the atmosphere of languor.



A long shot of a sun damaged wall cuts to a close up of the father dictating the letter: “Just do what you can. It would lighten our load.” The scene transitions to the little boy with his ball in his arm, playing with the dust. The father states, “These days, you are the only one who can help us.”





Different shots of the village succeed one another with the voiceover of the letter. Men begin moving from the wall as it no longer provides shade. Cut to a long shot of an empty part of the village, then a medium shot of a man walking with a child in arms, and then a long shot of the well where two women are collecting water. The photographer is packing his equipment. The day has gone. The village seems quite empty as the father states, “Thanks again…Thank you for helping your family, we know it is not easy.”





Nana and the little boy are seated on a different corner of a street wall and appear sad and desperate. We see bulls being chased by a boy and the empty village center. The sole exception to the desolate village is a passing motorcycle, whose sound of the motor evokes a disquieting feeling. As the motorcycle passes and disappears, the father concludes,

> “Believe me… we know how hard it is for you. I know that living in exile is difficult in itself, but the



> difficulties are not the same. May this New Year bring less hardship than the last. May god ensure that it brings much less hardship, much less pain than last year."

The sequence cuts back to the father of the family who sits, dignified in his plea, with the sound of his baby crying in the background as the traditional guitar music and song leads on the soundtrack and then cuts to....



.... a swarm of birds that descend upon the rice fields as boys and men chase them with flags. The little boy who was once playing with the ball is now working in the field swatting at the birds as the traditional music continues.



This scene could explain the procession filmed earlier, which may have originated in a collective action to fight the devastating effects of the birds. However, the uncertainty of the fate of Sokolo remains: The birds pose a literal threat to the survival of the people. Their destructive effects also capture the suffering and indifference of political authorities, of Europe and of the world.



Nana is pumping her bike tire, foreshadowing her departure that cuts to...



. ... a long fixed shot of the rice field where Dramane is walking with his father.





The use of the wide-angle shot in the rice field enhances the idea of the enormity of the task that remains to be accomplished. Dramane's father appears as a wise man counseling his son, who might soon return to Europe and draw attention to the plight of Sokolo. The nostalgic guitar music of Salif Keita plays in the background as Dramane concludes with the words of Césaire,

> "We are standing now, my country and me, our hair in the wind, my tiny hand now in its enormous fist, and strength is not in us but above us in a voice piercing the night, like the sting of an apocalyptic wasp. The voice proclaims that for centuries Europe has fed us lies and sent us plagues. For it is not true that man's work is done, that we have no place in this world, that we parasitize this world, that we have to walk in step with the world. Man's work has only just begun."...
>
> ... "Man has to conquer the forbidden stilled in the recesses of his fervor. No race has a monopoly on beauty, on intelligence or on strength. Everyone must find his place when the conquest comes. Now we know that the sun revolves around our Earth, illuminating the area our will alone has chosen and that every star shoots from heaven to Earth at our command, without limits."

The beautiful and wide landscape enhances Césaire's poetry again as a meditative and contemplative reflection to start the new millennium.



Nana riding away, probably to her village... as the music of Salif Keita "Folon" plays again in the background.

Credits – song



Notes for visual essay

[1] Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, p.11. [return to page 1]

[2] Deleuze Gilles and Guattari Feliz, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. See the introduction "Rhizomes" pp. 1-25 and more particularly pp.21-25.

[3] Saïd, Edward. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. xxxv.

[4] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markam. London: Pluto Press, 1986. p.157

[5] Interview with Abderrahmane Sissako: "Filmer n'est pas un Bonheur" by Osange Silou. In Cinémas africains, une oasis dans le désert? *Cineactions* (106), pp. 88-92.

[6] Myers, Mary. "The promotion of democracy at the grassroots. The example of Mali." *Democratization,* 5:2(*1998*): 200-216.

[7] See website: http://www.ictregulationtoolkit.org/en/toolkit/notes/PracticeNote/3153

[8] Hamblin, Sarah. "Toward a Transnational African Cinema: Image and Authenticity in *La vie sur terre*." *Black Camera,* vol. 3, n.2 (2012), p.14. [return to page 2]

[9] Hamblin, Sarah. *op.cit.*, p.13.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Part 2:

Temporal subversion and political critique in Abderrahmane Sissako's *La vie sur terre*

by Elise Finielz

Contemporary African filmmakers use cinema as a way of depicting and interpreting African experiences in the postcolonial context while simultaneously reinventing aesthetic forms and political engagements.[1] [open notes in new window] Abderrahmane Sissako is a world-renowned filmmaker from Mauritania who has in his own individual and creative way renewed francophone African cinema. His film *La vie sur terre (Life on Earth)* (Mali 1998) is a documentary fiction on the passage of the millennium in a rural Malian village. In this article, I explore the dynamics of temporalities this film presents; frequently the film resists a linear conception of history, creates temporal disruptions, and manipulates time in order to offer strong socio-political commentary.

La vie sur terre was commissioned by the French/German television channel La Sept Arte as part of a series entitled *L'An 2000 Vue Par…* (*The Year 2000 Seen By…*) for the millennium celebration. Each film was to be directed by a young filmmaker, set in a different country, on a different continent, and to take place during the last few days of December 1999. Out of the ten movies, the only director chosen from Africa was Abderrahmane Sissako. To fulfill the guidelines, Sissako decided to film in his father's village in Mali, portraying his own return to his native land, and to draw on Aimé Césaire's most famous poem "Notebook of a Return to the Native Land." Within the film, as the international French radio announces to the world the change of the new millennium, life goes on in Sokolo…

Using Walter Mignolo as a reference, I will argue that Sissako's film *La vie sur terre* subverts conceptions of Time and History as linear, chronological and dialectical in order to resist a global "chrono-politics" and re-inscribe the local time of the present and possible futures into "pluriversal time."[3]

The logic of coincidence

"Coincidence" may be defined as, "the occurrence of two or more things at the same time (coexistence, simultaneity, correspondence);" it is also "the notable concurrence of events or circumstances having no apparent causal connection." (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Considering the production of the film *La vie sur terre*, coincidence seems to have worked in two ways.

First, coincidence operated in the production process. The narrative emerged while making the movie, and many of the things that happened in the village

occurred by coincidence. There was no fixed narrative determined in advance. Instead of unfolding according to a traditional plot structure, *La vie sur terre* functions in some ways as a report, recording social reality and events from different places in the village. Indeed, the movie shows the village of Sokolo in its present way of life. The film is like a documentary fiction or a fictional documentary because by setting up fictional mini-stories in the village with no link to one another, it subverts the sense of realism generally pertaining to the documentary genre.[4] It was shot without professional actors, with a tiny shooting script of two or three pages. Villagers who become characters appear anonymously in their daily activities and routines (e.g., Dramane's father, the radio announcer, the post office employees, etc). Costumes were not used. Small narratives involving a number of figures in the town were developed and shot. This way of filming thus utilizes a middle ground between documentary and fiction and leaves space for both the director's and the villager-actors' improvisation.

Second, the movie's final structure largely took shape during the editing by cutting and juxtaposing shots contrary to traditional dramatic logic and sequencing and also by adding a narrator-Dramane's voice over. Dialogue is either brief or non-existent, with the audience's attention drawn more towards the scenery, emotions and humor. This manner of shooting and editing is especially adapted to the difficult conditions of film production in Africa: financial and logistical uncertainties, shooting in Africa then postproduction in France, lack of professional actors, the communities' experience of severe climatic conditions. However, it also has its advantages: a strong light and colors contributing to an aesthetic of local reality that is the substance of the film.

The experimental and ambiguous flow of *La vie sur terre* that we can view as a "documentary fiction" does not proceed with the logic of action. Indeed, as I mentioned, the film reduces narratological developments to a minimum. Often the viewer seems plunged into a purely visual situation accompanied by ambient sound. As one day passes in the film's slight narrative, characters move through a present situation shown in its "everydayness."[5] People in the movie evolve in a temporal reality that goes beyond the immediate past, present or future. The movie seems to achieve what in Deleuzian terms, could be called a time-image characteristic of modern cinema, in opposition to the movement-image, typical of classical Hollywood-inspired film. Regarding "movement-image," or more particularly "action-image," the presentation of time is indirect. It is tied to a sensory-motor process through which one image is subordinated to the other to produce a narrative; time here is subordinated to movement. In regards to time-image, the perception of time through movement no longer functions: "time is out of joint." In time-image, movement no longer measures time, but folds into time; the time-image, a new cinematic language, creates a direct presentation of time.

La vie sur terre also frustrates an idea of authenticity, a quality one could attach to the documentary genre. *La vie sur terre* can generate unstable meanings attributable to the events in the film because of its suggestive but not precisely located connections between images, texts and sounds.[6] In its gestalt it creates what Deleuze would call a rhizomatic dynamic. As a result, it produces for the viewer a new and dynamic level of perception/reception. As an example of coincidence, director, Abderrahmane Sissako, tells in an interview that he had chosen randomly Nana for the main female character of the movie—when she was riding her bike one day in front of the camera. Moreover, for the scenes at the post office, the director asked people to make a phone call, but what happens next was the product of pure improvisation and spontaneity:

> "We were fortunate for the movie that this girl went by at this moment. It was the same thing for the scenes at the post office: when I would

> ask someone to call (the phone is very present in the movie) I did not know what would happen next. I was choosing the other characters depending on the things I had already got. But it was always a surprise. This construction was open to permanent improvisation. We had “to be there.””[7]

In this way, the filming in the village constantly relied on a process of “documentary fiction.”

Furthermore, the moment of the millennium does not work as an element of a character’s action or a crucial narratological element. But it does work as a motif or a coincidence in the sense that two parallel moments are occurring at the same time. The local radio broadcasts global news in the background (Radio France International), providing information on the celebration of the millennium in various metropolises worldwide. Simultaneously the images reflect the very present moment of that announcement to depict a village where life is caught in a movement that transcends the duration of the movie. Presenting Radio France and its village listeners creates a parallel and a discrepancy, discordance and contrast between advancing, linear modern time juxtaposed against the village’s suspended time.

In Mignolo’s essay *The Darker Side of Western Modernity,* “time” is a fundamental concept for building the imaginary of the modern/colonial world and an instrument for both controlling knowledge and advancing a vision of society based on progress and “development.”[7b] Modernity creates its own counterpart or binary: “tradition” without which it could not exist. These two terms, *time* and *tradition*, could only emerge through a linear conception of time, imagining a point of departure and a point of arrival. This conception of time underpins “progress” and “evolution,” and nowadays “development”; it serves as a rhetorical discourse imposing modernity and the coloniality of knowledge [8] at the expense of any other conception of time being relegated to the “traditional” or “old”:

> “The idea of modernity needed its own tradition in order to be distinguished as modernity. Thus, while modernity was established by inventing its own tradition (Middle Ages and Antiquity) and colonizing time, it so happens that in the colonization of space the rhetoric of modernity was used to disavow the legitimacy of the “traditions” (invented in the process of inventing modernity) of civilizations that were colonized.”[9]

Mignolo’s analysis builds upon the Martiniquan writer and theorist Edouard Glissant’s critique of History in revealing the structure of power serving an ideology of progress and modernity to justify imperialistic ambitions.[10] Glissant denounces the hegemonic concept of History (with a capital *H*) as a linear and hierarchical process, instrumentalized to erase the collective memories of colonized peoples. Glissant writes:

> “History is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone ‘made’ the history of the World. If Hegel relegated African peoples to the ahistorical, Ameredian peoples to the prehistorical in order to reserve History for European peoples exclusively, it appears that it is not because these African or American peoples 'have entered History' that we can conclude today that such a hierarchical conception of “the march of History” is no longer relevant."[11]

According to Mignolo, contemporary globalization continues to reproduce imperial and colonial differentiation. In the postmodern era, the leitmotiv “time is

money" and the accompanying corporate ideology of efficiency and productivity give rise to an "acceleration of time" that mainly occurs in the spheres of the market, finance, and media. In turn, relations between time, work, and value are completely disrupted.

Sissako's film *La vie sur terre,* from my perspective,illustrates the discrepancy between two different conceptions of time as it attempts to resist "global coloniality." The movie starts in a Parisian supermarket saturated with consumer goods and then shows Sokolo, the village of the director's father. Time in the village appears to pass slowly. Life is given rhythm by the natural cycles of the seasons and harvest (the rice), natural elements (birds coming to eat in the fields), and life events (birth and death). In addition, the film is edited to focus on just one day, showing typical patterns of daily living in one specific village. Time as represented in the film corresponds to what Mignolo calls "cyclical" or "cosmological time."

The fever and hectic time of the millennium embedded in a linear time of chronological events would be completely absent in the film if it were not for the news from France International Radio playing in the background. The radio provides commentary on how many cities celebrate the millennium's passage. But these reports seem out of place in the village where life is not disturbed by this event; indeed, nothing "exciting" seems to happen. The voice on the radio states,

> "In Paris, thousands are expected to attend local dances and fireworks displays. Huge crowds are expected at the Eiffel Tower. For 1000 days, it has been counting down to the year 2000."

At the same time in the village, a barrel falls off a donkey cart driven by a reckless youth. Its crashing down makes a sound that foreshadows the counting of the millennium, but at the same time that sound also re-appropriates this counting down in its own way, in the way the village is experiencing it. It is a trivial sound that does not mean an important celebration, a passage toward something new or different. The juxtaposition of the radio countdown and this crash reminds the spectator of time's abruptness and artificiality since this event does not produce anything significant other than a brief, amusing moment in the course of daily life.

There is an inherent paradox about life in Sokolo: it is a life in the margins away from the hectic time in the world's capitals. Here nothing much seems to take place except time as played out in life's daily routines. The fragmented narrative of *La Vie sur Terre* as a documentary-fiction creates an atmosphere or an impression, using intersecting images. The film as a whole demonstrates a refusal of linear narrative logic. Despite being an apparently drowsy place, the village also has within it constant movement—people walking, riding bikes, or driving carriages, and all sorts of animals (cows, donkeys, dogs, chickens…) crisscrossing the landscape. In addition, long shots with a stationary camera and a fixed focal length create very linear spatial movements on the screen, especially in images dwelling on the environment.

Aimé Césaire and the colonial critique

Born in 1913 in the island of Martinique, which was at the time a French colony, Aimé Césaire came from a modest family of seven children. He was a brilliant student, and he spent five years in Paris completing his education—in the prestigious *lycée Louis Legrand* and later in the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*. His years in exile were very formative. In Paris, Césaire began to discover progressively the repressed part of his Martiniquan identity, his African identity. Furthermore, that discovery coincided with his growing awareness of the colonial

situation since he was in contact with students from Africa and the African Diaspora. Among those was Leopold Sedar Senghor, who was seven years his elder and who also attended the *lycée Louis Legrand* where they met and started their longtime friendship. Along with the poet and soon-to-be president of Senegal, Senghor, and his Guyanese counterpart, Léon Gontran Damas, Césaire co-founded the the student journal *L'étudiant noir*, targeting an audience of Black students.

In this journal was Césaire's epiphany; he wrote an article that for the first time coined the term "Negritude" in response and as a counter to the colonial system of oppression and racial alienation. Against the French imperial project of a "civilizing mission" and cultural assimilation, the Negritude movement worked toward giving a new valorization to Africa and its culture. Negritude meant claiming pride in an African heritage that had been long disregarded and looked upon as "primitive" by ethnocentric European ideology. The founders of Negritude were influenced by German anthropologist Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) whose late work *Kulturegeschichte Afrikas* (1933) (*History of the African civilization*), translated into French in 1936, sought to address and rehabilitate Africa's pre-colonial past. Frobrenius' research posited that Africa was the site of many highly significant and esteemed cultures and civilizations.

Aimé Césaire started to write what would become his poetic masterpiece: *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land)* as he visited the Adriatic coast with his friend Petar Guberina from Yugoslavia. A small island Martiniska whose name coincidentally resonates with Martinique, Césaire's own island, would have inspired him.[12] Upon his return to Martinique to teach at his former *lycée Schoelcher* with his new wife Suzanne Roussi, he published the first version of the *Cahier* in the journal *Volontés* in 1939.[13] The poem was later discovered in 1942 by the surrealist poet André Breton, who with a group of intellectuals (among whom also the Cuban artist Wilfredo Lam) was fleeing World War II in Europe and sought refuge in the United States. During a stop in Martinique, Breton serendipitously ran into the review *Tropiques* at a small store when his intent was simply to buy a ribbon for his daughter. It was there he read in amazement some excerpts of Aimé Césaire's poetry. Thanks to this unexpected encounter, the *Cahier* made its way to New York and Cuba, contributing to Césaire's worldwide acclaim. Consequentially, a Spanish translation was published in *La Havana* in 1943 that was enriched by illustrations from the surrealist painter Wilfredo Lam.[14] Later, the first bilingual edition was published in 1947 in New York and included a laudatory preface from André Breton to Césaire that described the *Cahier* as, "the greatest lyric monument of our time."[15] Finally, the commonly accepted "definitive edition" of the publisher "Présence africaine" appeared in 1956.[16]

Nothing like such a poem had ever been written from the Antilles; the style there was marked at that time by "doudouisme," a literary style grounded in a very exotic and stereotypical representation of the French Antilleans. Influenced by surrealist poets and their ancestors, Rimbaud and Mallarmé, and the symbolists Claudel and Lautréamont, using both verse and prose poetry, violent imagery, obscure and technical vocabulary, Césaire reveals the most intolerable reality of his island. The *Cahier* transports the reader through his personal journey while developing a complex vision of the devastating alienation, desolation, and self-estrangement of Martiniquan people who were worn out by years of slavery and colonization. From the explosive poem, written under the sign of *poesis* rather than *mimesis*, surged an ontological preoccupation:

"a claim of existence from within the colonial discourse rather than establishing a counter discourse from outside."[17]

The extraordinary force of Césaire's poetic voice is to achieve through language the promise of an emancipatory project by articulating a lyrical self-realization that manifests itself in consciousness within the historical context of a collective fate. The poem not only seeks to claim the value of Negritude, to transform a racial ideology into a heuristic and creative impulse, but also to embrace the African heritage and in doing so to rearticulate its relation to temporal past, present and future with European colonial powers, and in solidarity with all the oppressed people of the world.

> "It weaves a tragic and in no way complacent poetics of the geography and history of this country that was still unknown to itself, and for the first time in our literature, it marked a communication, a relation, of this same country, with the civilizations of Africa, the histories, at long last known, of Haiti and the blacks of the United States, the peoples of the Andes and South America, with the sufferings of the world, its passions and its tremors."[18]

The poem has had an immense impact on Caribbean literature as well as French poetry and also on decolonization movements across the globe including artists and writers from Africa and the Black Diaspora. In Martinique, in particular, Césaire has had a profound influence on the following generations of intellectuals, such as Frantz Fanon, who was his student at the *lycée Schoelcher* and Edouard Glissant.

Césaire's poetic project was closely tied to his political engagement. After World War II, he joined the Communist Party and in 1945 was elected mayor of Fort de France (will be constantly reelected to serve for 56 years) and deputy of Martinique for the French National Assembly (a position that he kept for 48 years). Furthermore, against the assimilation of his island by France, he successfully initiated the law of departmentalization that would give Martinique the status of an overseas department, with equal economic and legal rights, although this law raised a lot of controversies later upon failing to create independence for the island. As a parliament member, he was at the forefront of the critique of colonialism. The publication of his best-known prose essay, *Discours sur le colonialisme (Discourse on Colonialism)*, was first unnoticed in 1950 but internationally acclaimed after the second publication by Présence africaine in 1955.[19] Contrary to what the title may indicate, *Discours sur le colonialisme* has never been formally a speech. Rather, it takes the form of a virulent, implacable pamphlet against European colonialist ideology, an ideology that led to the worst atrocities and racist regimes in the history of humanity. Césaire attacks colonialism through its own principles by highlighting the contradictions and hypocrisy of the western notion of humanism, progress, and civilization. Fascism and Nazism are the direct outcomes, or "the supreme savagery," of practices and methods that Europeans implemented first against non-European peoples in their colonies. Judging Europe as "indefensible," Césaire with great audacity calls into question French intellectuals and politicians with poetic eloquence and personalized satire. *Discours sur le colonialisme* thereafter became a groundbreaking and key text for the anti-colonial movements against European domination.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

A coincidental regime of historicity

By revisiting the words of the famous poet and politician, Aimé Césaire, Sissako not only pays homage to someone who deeply influenced his art, but as a director, he also gives an allegorical dimension to the trivial life of a small Malian village. The narrative voice of the director reading Aimé Césaire's poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* provides a poetic and metaphorical force coinciding with the visual representation of Sokolo and its people. The poem operates at an individual and biographical level through the story of exile and return to the homeland, but also at the collective level framed by its anti-colonial message and contemporary postcolonial reality caught between hope and despair. The poem also serves as a counterpoint against an ongoing chrono-politics imposed on Sokolo and post-colonial Africa. Mignolo defines Chrono-politics as:

> "... a *civilizational* principle that serves to ostracize all who do not conform to the modern conventions of time, that devalues 'subalterns' for being slow and not racing toward death, which in the rhetoric of modernity is translated as 'progress and development.'"[20] [open notes in new window]

As mentioned before, the ambiguity of the images emerging from a cinematic work that seems between documentary and fiction does not provide an obvious message. The movie evolves in ellipses and captures seemingly unimportant aspects of real life pertaining to the present moment rather than illustrate an imposed meaning. How can an anti-colonial discourse or poem, which is situated historically, be interpreted fifty years later? How do these anti-colonial writings pertaining to a particular moment of decolonization still frame the political commentary of a contemporary postcolonial movie? How do they operate in the narrative of the movie? What do they say about the reality of the present portrayed in the movie?

The voices of Aimé Césaire and Abderrahmane Sissako coincide in the sense that the narrator of the movie also experiences a return to the native land: there is a re-appropriation of the poetic narrative. But, like the poem, the movie is not just about the narrator returning to his village. The personal voice of the poet and film director soon embodies the collective voice expressing the preoccupations of the villagers and the economic difficulties faced by an entire continent. The book-length *Cahier*, although historically situated—written in different steps before decolonization, provides a universal message and a transcendental force which attempts to heal the colonial wounds that persist in a globalized world. The timely call for decolonization does not appear as anachronistic (atemporal) but still meaningful forty years after decolonization. The poetic voice of Aimé Césaire gives a lyrical dimension to the village of Sokolo, which is not entirely filmed for itself but also to represent the dramatic fate of the African continent at the end of the 20th century. The director uses the specificity of the local through the lens of Césaire. Social commentary from the poem is relevant to the moment in the movie. The local radio, ironically called "Radio colon la voix du riz" ("Colonist Radio, the voice of rice"), serves as a relay of the poet's famous *Discours sur le colonialisme* through its program "la bibliothèque parlé" ("the open air library"):

> “Le grand drame de l’Afrique a moins été sa mise en contact trop tardive avec le reste du monde, que la manière dont ce contact a été opéré; que c’est au moment où l’Europe est tombée entre les mains des financiers et des capitaines d’industries les moins dénués de scrupules que l'Europe s'est « propagée » ; que notre malchance a voulu que ce soit cette Europe-là que nous ayons rencontrée sur notre route et que l'Europe est comptable devant la communauté humaine du plus haut tas de cadavres de l'histoire.”
>
> “Africa’s historic tragedy was less its coming in contact with the rest of the world too late than the way this contact occurred. It was when Europe fell into the hands of industrial leaders entirely lacking in scruples that it expanded. Our misfortune meant it was that Europe we encountered, that Europe which is responsible for the highest pile of corpses in history.”[21]

In this excerpt, Césaire reacts against a misconception about the “historic tragedy” of Africa. Indeed, at that time according to Western criteria of historicity —in particular how they were developed by Hegel—Africa hadn’t entered history. At the end of the 18th century, in his theory on history, the famous philosopher argues:

> “Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained-for all purposes of connection with the rest of the World-shut up; it is the Gold-land compressed within itself-the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night. Its isolated character originates, not merely in its tropical nature, but essentially in its geographical condition.”[22]

Against such an ahistoric and very “dark” vision of the African continent, Aimé Césaire, in the *Discourse*, resituates the event of colonization outside a linear conception of history and in turn frames it within a precise geopolitical and economic context. The history of colonization cannot be inscribed into an evolutionary process of the world, or understood as a civilizing mission to lift the natives out of the age of darkness and childhood to turn them into civilized human beings. European colonization is rather the result of an unfortunate coincidence. It is not that Africa has been in the margins of the march of history, but the colonization of Africa (or its historic tragedy) resulted in the continent’s encounter with mercenary European capitalism. Indeed, Africa has been involved in the history of modern Western imperialism since the age of exploration. The discovery of the new world and its colonization by the maritime European powers, was concomitant with the age of beginning trade and manufacture in the West. The exploitation of natural resources and territories in America resulted in a strong demand for labor to supply the European markets with plantation produce and precious metals.

Because Ameridians died in large numbers, either from disease or killed by the colonizers, and the number of European immigrants was insufficient, Africa was to become the main provider of free labor. From the middle of the 15th century up to the 19th century, an estimated 12.5 millions of slaves were deported from Africa to different parts of the Americas and the Caribbean islands and more than a million and a half did not survive the voyage.[23] In Africa itself, an undocumented numbers of victims died while they were captured or on their way to the coast to be sold. If they reached their final destination, slaves worked in the worst conditions. Their life expectancy would not exceed ten years. The exact number of victims of one of the deadliest human enterprise is impossible to know.

After the abolition and suppression of the slave trade and then the abolition of slavery, Africa faced another brutal encounter with predatory Europe. The second

industrial revolution and the need for raw materials and natural resources spurred European colonial appetites in Africa itself. By 1914, European imperial powers had divided and taken over the entire continent of Africa, except for Ethiopia and Liberia. This "misfortune" (the term "malchance" or "misfortune" retains an explicit reference to a coincidental occurrence) perpetuates itself across the years, even after decolonization. The repetition of the discourse on colonialism 45 years later is, in turn, important because Europe is deaf to the silent suffering of the former colonized world as the poetic words of Césaire through Dramane's voice reminds us,

> "Europe convulsed in screams, the silent currents of despair fearfully pulling itself together and proudly overestimating itself." (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*)

France is, among former colonial powers, well known for its denial regarding its colonial past. If France officially recognized slave trades and slaveries perpetrated by European powers against populations deported to Europe, America and the Indian Ocean, from the 15th century, and called it a crime against humanity (law of May 21, 2001 called "Loi Taubira"), in 2005, another law (law of February 23rd, 2005) claimed in one of its articles "the positive aspects of colonization." This law raised so many protests in France, in its former colonies and in overseas departments, that authorities had to repeal the article. In 2007, nine years after Sissako's movie, Nicolas Sarkozy, president of France at that time, delivered a highly controversial speech at the university of Dakar, which reveals the long-lasting denial of history and persistence of the Hegelian paradigm toward "Africa" that is commonplace in part of the French political elite and general public.[24]

Today indeed, it is not Africa "being late" on a scale of "development," unable to adapt to the progress of a modern changing world, but a continent, whose economies have been structured by a global capitalist system that perpetuates mechanisms of dependency, generating what is called "underdevelopment." Against the image of an immobile and static village living in a mythic time of unalterable traditions, the film aims at representing it as a place of constant movements but also a site of dynamics and change. The phone center at the post-office is one example of a modern telecommunication system well established in the village. It probably closed a few years later, replaced by cyber cafés and mobile phones.

However, the tragedy of colonization seems to prolong itself in the tragedy of the postcolonial state, but in a more subtle and surreptitious way. Towards the end, the film moves toward less referential images to a form of abstraction while it develops a more dramatic tone. Thus the desperate words of a villager writing a letter asking his brother overseas to continue helping him to insure the basic needs of his family (food, water, health care), or he and his relatives will not be able to survive in the village. Those words are ominous. Africa's unpredictable future stems directly from the detrimental heritage of colonization.

Here I limit this broad argument to the example of agriculture, shown in Sissako's film. From an economic point of view, colonization required the "modernization" of agricultural activities. From the early days of colonization, African economies were reorganized for a production systematically geared toward exportation of raw materials or mining resources that would gain value within European industries once transformed into manufactured products. Financial investments were mainly directed toward sectors that would sustain their own economic growth. Moreover, colonies have endured the cost of financial investments to build the infrastructures of this new economy through mechanisms of taxation and debts. Because the resources coming from local taxes were too low, the colonies were forced to have recourse to loans since the early beginning of the 20th century.[25] All colonial powers throughout Africa practiced this "model of

development" to limit their own expenditures and maximize their profits from the exploitation of the new African market.

Hence, a system of international loans contributes to increase the wealth of creditors and to leads to the impoverishment of the debt's recipients. After decolonization, development plans were carried on in the same mold reproducing the same mechanisms of underdevelopment inherited from the colonial era: an economy restricted to monoculture and raw materials geared toward exports, vulnerable and dependent on the variations of the world exchange rates set in Western stock exchanges, maintaining African countries in the subservient role of providers of raw materials. In the meantime, food-producing agriculture has been neglected compromising countries' capacity and autonomy to feed their population, creating risks of food shortages, especially in areas with harsh climate conditions. In addition, the structure of the financial investments in the African economies remained unchanged, coming in great majority from the outside (through development funds from former colonies or international institutions).

In the 80s and 90s, the adjustment and structural reform policies from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund reinforced the permanence of the structure of African economies, in particular the structure of exports, encouraging the development of the existing exportation products as a response to the debt crisis.[26] Consequentially, among the "least developed countries" in the world listed by the United Nations Committee for Development Policy, a majority is located in Sub-Saharan Africa. Mali has been on the list since 1971. Mali economy is primarily based on agriculture: it represents 43.6% of the GDP in 2000, and 80% of the population derives its livelihood from this sector.[27] But the production is extremely irregular and extremely vulnerable to natural hazards (drought, flood, ravaging animals). On top of cereal (millet, sorghum, rice, and corn), Mali produces cotton, which is the country's largest export crop and has been developed since the colonial era.[28] In the 90s, gold mining expanded rapidly. Gold is becoming the primary export product, above cotton. Therefore, in spite of the different political regimes since decolonization (socialist, military-led regime followed by democracy), the Malian economy has been dominated by the primary sector, dependent on climate variability and on price of raw materials on the international market.

In *La vie sur terre*, the birds ravaging the crops in the fields are representations of the economic disaster. The discontent and solidarity of the local community are focused upon, visually depicted when a group of peasants is walking together in a silent procession that embodies what could be an unspoken form of collective action. During their march, the voice of Aimé Césaire's poem adds a dramatic layer:

> "The devastating pettiness of this death hobbling from one pettiness to the next" (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*).

One shot later, the viewer understands the tragedy: the food security of the local community is threatened if the birds are not fought against day after day.

In spite of this very harsh reality, the prophetic and spiritual force of poetry is a promise of a future-to-come or "l'avenir" to use Derrida's term.[29] The poet becomes an epic hero chronicling and beseeching for a change in fate while living in an intolerable state of economic despair and stagnation. The prophetic words of Aimé Césaire coupled with images of the villagers at work (the tailor at his sewing machine, the young men chasing the birds) and at the end of Dramane and his father walking in the wide rice fields, open a meditative space for historical remission:

> "Strength is not in us but above us in a voice piercing the night, like

> the sting of an apocalyptic wasp. The voice proclaims that for centuries Europe has fed us lies and sent us plagues. For it is not true that man's work is done, that we have no place in this world, that we parasitize this world, that we have to walk in step with the world. Man's work has only just begun. Man has to conquer the forbidden stilled in the recesses of his fervor. Now we know that the sun revolves around our Earth, illuminating the area our will alone has chosen and that every star shoots from heaven to Earth at our command, without limits." (*Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*)

I think of *La vie sur terre* as an attempt to think beyond historicism. By filming in multiple ways of being outside the fever of the millennium, the film negotiates the plenitude of presents and futures that refuse to comply with the prescription of imposed historical processes. It participates in what Mignolo calls decolonial thinking:

> "Undoing the colonial difference as was built in the concept of time will involve, among other things, removing time from the privileged position it acquires in complicity with science, capitalism and the mono-culturalism (e.g., universalism) of Western civilization."[30]

The film is a gesture to "provincialize Europe" [31] in the sense that Europe orchestrates history. At the end, Nana, the main female character, pedals off on her bike to a neighboring town, perhaps the one she was trying to call. The film does not end on a pessimistic note, but concludes in a climatic suspension. Nana on her bike disappears progressively from the camera in a convergence line, leaving the viewer a question of potential.

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Notes

[1] I am very thankful to the many reviewers of the visual and critical essay for their careful reading, generous support, and valuable advice. I especially would like to thank my professor Natalie Melas for introducing me to Abderrhamane Sissako's films, and for her inspiration and encouragement to complete this work. I also would like to thank the editors of *Jump Cut*, and the many proofreaders and commentators of both essays: Patricia Waelder, Caleb Haines, Kathleen Haines, Ross Getman, Neal Allard, Yen Vu, and Maria Flood. [return to page 5]

[2] Abderrahmane Sissako was born in Mauritania in 1961. He grew up in Mali, was trained as a filmmaker in Russia (like Sembène Ousmane) and now resides in France. Since *Life on Earth,* he has released three feature films: *Waiting for Hapiness* (2002), *Bamako* (2006) and more recently *Timbuktu* (2014) which was selected to compete for the Palme d'or in Cannes and won seven France's Cesar awards in February 2015; Sissako's work has confirmed his talent as one of the most prominent African film-makers.

[3] I am borrowing the concept of "chrono-politics" and "pluriversality" to Walter Mignolo from his book entitled *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Future, Decolonial Option*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2011. Those terms will be explained in the course of the demonstration.

[4] Rachel Gabara, cited by Hamblin. See Sarah Hamblin, "Toward a Transnational African Cinema: Image and Authenticity in *La vie sur terre," Black Camera,* vol. 3, n.2 (2012), p.13.

[5] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The time-image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989. p.41.

[6] Hamblin, pp.16-18.

[7] Interview with the director Abderrahmane Sissako, Fiche techniques
http://www.cinemalefrance.com/fiches/viesurterre.pdf
Accessed March 23, 2016.

[7b] Mignolo uses *imaginary* in the sense of Edouard Glissant. The *imaginary* for Glissant encompasses "the ways, conflictive and contradictory, a culture has of perceiving and conceiving of the world." (Mignolo, p.152)

[8] Coloniality is a key concept of Mignolo's work. Its meaning is broader that colonialism : "it is a colonial matrix of power through which world order has been created and managed." (Mignolo, p.171.)

[9] Mignolo, p.160.

[10] See: Edouard Glissant, "The Quarrel with History." *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Trans. Michael Dash. Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1992, p.61-65. See: Mignolo, pp.149-180.

[11] Glissant, p. 64.

[12] A. James Arnold, *Modernism and Negritude. The Poetry and Poetics of Aimé Césaire*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981, p. 10.

[13] Aimé Césaire, "Cahier d'un retour au pays natal." *Volontés* 20, 1939.

[14] Aimé Césaire, *Retorno al pais natal.* La Havana, Molina, 1943.

[15] Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal.* New York, Brentanos, bilingual edition, 1947.

[16] Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal.*Paris, Présence Africaine, 1956.

[17] Nathalie Mélas, All the difference in the world: postcoloniality and the end of comparison, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 173

[18] Edouard Glissant, "Aimé Césaire: The Poet's Passion" *Small Axe* 27 (Oct. 2008), p. 121.

[19] Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*. Paris, Présence Africaine, 1955.

[20] Mignolo, p.178. [return to page 6]

[21] Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme,* pp.14-15.

[22] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree, New York, Dover Publications, 1956, p. 18.

[23] David Eltis, "A Brief Overview of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade," Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database,
http://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/essay
Accessed July 6, 2016.

[24] Among the most contentious part of the speech:

> "The tragedy of Africa is that the African has not fully entered into history. The African peasant, who for thousands of years has lived according to the seasons, whose life ideal was to be in harmony with nature, only knew the eternal renewal of time, rhythmed by the endless repetition of the same gestures and the same words.
>
> In this imaginary world where everything starts over and over again there is no place for human adventure or for the idea of progress. In this universe where nature commands all, man escapes from the anguish of history that torments modern man, but he rests immobile in the centre of a static order where everything seems to have been written beforehand.
>
> This man (the traditional African) never launched himself towards the future. The idea never came to him to get out of this repetition and to invent his own destiny. The problem of Africa, and allow a friend of Africa to say it, is to be found here. Africa's challenge is to enter to a greater extent into history. To take from it the energy, the force, the desire, the willingness to listen and to espouse its own history.
>
> Africa's problem is to stop always repeating, always mulling over, to liberate itself from the myth of the eternal return. It is to realize that the golden age that Africa is forever recalling will not return because it has never existed. Africa's problem is that it lives the present too much

in nostalgia for a lost childhood paradise."

From the unofficial translation in English,
http://www.africaresource.com/essays-a-reviews/essays-a-discussions/437-the-unofficial-english-translation-of-sarkozys-speech
Accessed June 28, 2016.

The speech recycled without any subtlety the old racial prejudice prevalent in the colonial era and has generated many criticisms, especially from African scholars. See for example, Makhily Gassama, ed., *L'Afrique répond à Sarkozy. Contre le discours de Dakar*, Paris, Philippe Rey, février 2008; Jean-Pierre Chrétien, ed., *L'Afrique de Sarkozy. Un déni d'histoire*, Karthala, juin 2008; Adamé Ba Konaré, ed., *Petit précis de remise à niveau sur l'histoire africaine à l'usage du president Sarkosy*. Paris, La Découverte, 2008.

[25] Sébastin Dossa Sotindjo, "Pérennité des structures de dépendance et reproduction du sous-développement: le cas du Bénin (ex-Dahomey) de la colonization à aujourd'hui. In Adamé Ba Konaré, ed., *Petit précis de remise à niveau sur l'histoire africaine à l'usage du president Sarkosy*. Paris, La Découverte, 2008, pp. 227-239.

[26] Sotindjo, p.238.

[27] See: Ministère de l'économie et des finances, République du Mali, "Situation économique et sociale du Mali en 2000 et perspectives pour 2001" http://www.malikunnafoni.com/bibliostat/docs/030107037_dnpd-dnsi_2001.pdf Accessed July 13, 2016.

[28] On the history of the colonial cotton development, see: Richard L. Roberts, *Two worlds of cotton. Colonialism and the regional economy in the French Soudan, 1800-1946*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1996.

[29] *Derrida*- a Film by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (2002). Derrida explains the differentiation of the future and the future to come or "l'avenir":

> "In general, I try to distinguish between what one calls the future and "l'avenir." The future is that which – tomorrow, later, next century – will be. There's a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, l'avenir (to come) which refers to someone who comes, whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future beyond this other known future, it's l'avenir in that it's the coming of the Other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival."

[30] Mignolo, *op.cit*. p.175.

[31] See: Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2007.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Gendered visions in *As If I Am Not There* and *In the Land of Blood and Honey*: female precarity, the humanitarian gaze and the politics of situated knowledge

by Dijana Jelača

Introduction: on the politics of visual recognition

> "To set aside the sympathy we extend to others beset by war and murderous politics for a reflection on how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may—in ways we might prefer not to imagine—be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others, is a task for which the painful, stirring images supply only an initial spark."
> —Susan Sontag (2004: 103)

> "The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular."
> —Donna Haraway (1988: 590)

In the global digital era, the relation between screen technologies and their visual representation of suffering poses increasing challenges to the ethics of witnessing. How can we visually frame suffering in ethical ways that avoid the pitfalls of oversaturation, simplistic objectification, or fetishization of pain or pity? In her influential work *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag (2003) suggests that to look at someone's pain and capture it through a lens requires that one not intervene to alleviate that pain; she implies that the two activities—screening and aiding—are often mutually exclusive. In her earlier work, *On Photography* (1973), Sontag notes that photographic images make an event seem more real, yet the longer those images are displayed, they paradoxically make the same event less real, or more disconnected from and having less of an impact of "realness" on those who see them. Sontag (who personally played an important, if at times problematic role as a Western "celebrity" witness to the Sarajevo siege during the Bosnian war) raises the question of whether the inevitable oversaturation that accompanies mediated depictions of others' pain makes those who visually witness that pain less likely to be moved to meaningful action. Witnessing the pain of an other, according to Sontag, needs to be a starting point for an ethical encounter rather than an end unto itself.

This critical insight poses a challenge vis-à-vis the global politics of representing



A documentary that revisits the pain of an other: *Images from the Corner* (Jasmila Žbanić, 2000)



As If I Am Not There (Juanita Wilson, 2010)

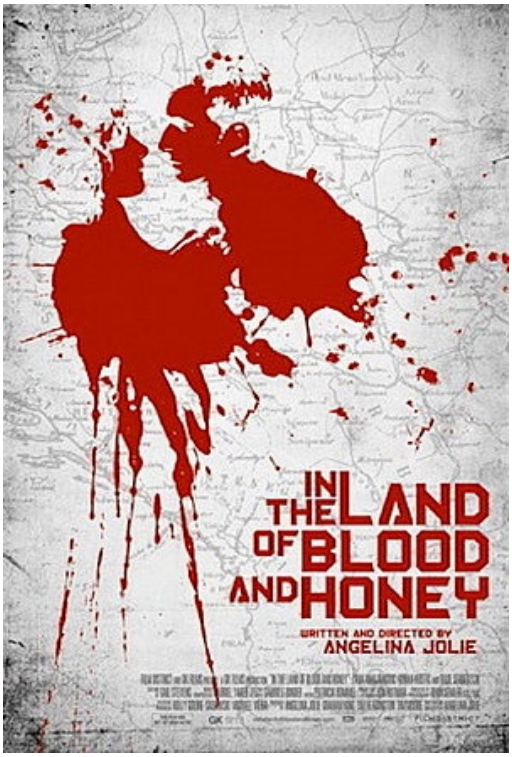
distant suffering, a challenge that Judith Butler expands upon in *The Frames of War* (2009). Referring to Sontag's denouncing mediated depictions of suffering others, Butler considers the opposite: such depictions also often bring to light the injustices inflicted during far away conflicts—injustices that might otherwise never receive international scrutiny. Butler does not resolve this dilemma but admits to no easy resolution. In the case of the Abu Ghraib images that Butler analyzes, for instance, the pictures *both* represent the medium by which abuse came to light *and also* function as a torture device in their own right. The photos were taken by the abusers themselves to further denigrate their captives. In such cases, the ethical conundrum has no easy resolution.

The issue becomes arguably more complicated when moving images take primacy over photography's static frames. Today, when digital technology allows for instantaneous worldwide dissemination, the image can render events as seemingly immediate and real (Chouliaraki 2006). Furthermore, in her exploration of "the manner in which cinema frames and mediates pain and works to implicate its audience in this process" (2010: 63), Libby Saxton finds that "the relationship between cinema and distant suffering has become a discernable concern in certain forms of modern and postmodern filmmaking" (64). She argues that in narrative cinema, "scenes of suffering can bring into focus the ethically fraught interconnections between film protagonists and spectators" (64).

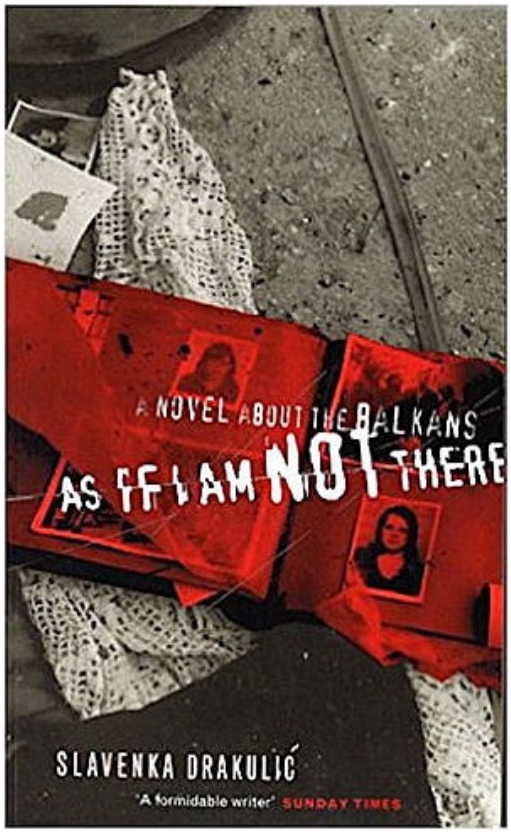
Nevertheless, it is as true now as when Sontag wrote in 1973 that the context within which an image circulates and the discourse that envelops it play a key role in an image's interpretation and social effect. That context and its accompanying discourse are always changing. Additionally, as Butler notes, a single image can be framed in many different ways. One possible way of framing the pain of others is through documentary filmmaking, where, as Julia Lesage (2009) argues with respect to torture documentaries, the framing can be multifold:

> "Because there is so much information about the issue of torture, far more than any one person can remember or easily draw upon, the documentaries offer a structure for organizing that knowledge, setting out main ideas that can shape further exploration or be modified as the viewer reads more about the subject on his/her own."[1] [open notes in new window]

In the context of the former Yugoslavia, a notable documentary by Bosnian director Jasmila Žbanić tackles the ethics of relations between image, suffering and objectification. In her documentary *Images from the Corner* (*Slike sa ugla*, 2000), the filmmaker reconstructs a painful episode from the wartime siege of Sarajevo, when one of her schoolmates was gravely wounded in a shelling attack. Žbanić recalls that a foreign journalist took a picture of her wounded schoolmate lying on the street corner where the grenade fell; that photo went on to become an internationally recognized, award-winning depiction of the plight of Sarajevo's citizens. However, Žbanić refuses to show the image in her documentary. Instead, the filmmaker wonders how this lasting depiction of the wounded woman's pain perpetuates her suffering and additionally, how the fact that the journalist took



In the Land of Blood and Honey (Angelina Jolie, 2011)



Slavenka Drakulić's novel *As If I Am Not There: A Novel about the Balkans*, which was the basis for Wilson's film

photographs during the moments of her agony implies he did nothing to help the wounded girl. In one poignant scene, we see the empty corner where the event took place while we hear the sound of three rolls of film being snapped (supposedly the number of images the photographer took). With this sequence, Žbanić viscerally illustrates the duration of time that it took the photographer to take the images, and consequently the duration that the girl lay wounded while her pain was transformed into an object for the Western journalist's award-winning lens. Guided by Sontag's division between screening and aiding, Žbanić condemns as inhumane the journalist's priviledging of documenting over giving relief.

My essay refocuses the lens. I take as my point of departure the uncertain ground on which screen technology—here narrative cinema—*both* fetishizes the pain of others *and* addresses the imperative of ethically bearing witness in ways that challenge simplistic identification or representation. I examine two films about the Bosnian war and practice of mass rape, both made by Western filmmakers: *As If I Am Not There* (Juanita Wilson, 2010, based on a novel by Slavenka Drakulić), and *In the Land of Blood and Honey* (Angelina Jolie, 2011, based on the director's own script and conversations with survivors). Both films have similar themes, attempt to ground themselves in the local history of the conflict that they depict, and posit the need to bear witness to the pain of others as an ethical focus. Thus the two films share remarkable similarities in both extra-cinematic and narrative domains. And it may at first seem that their politics of representing the distant suffering of a foreign female subject align as well. Quite the contrary. I show in this essay how, with all their surface-level similarities, the two films frequently differ with respect to the visual language used to represent the female victim. This very difference in visual grammar indicates important divergence in the films' ethics of representing the pain of others.

In the sections that follow, I examine some implications about how the cinematic apparatus of vision may depict the pain of others. It can control and limit how a conflict is interpreted, especially when staging a humanitarian gaze from an all-knowing above. Alternatively, a partial field of vision can become a site of opportunity for undoing fixed historical emplotments. I analyze the films' different visual approaches, enabling the spectator to see (or not see) the pain of others, by looking at their spectrum of gender performativity. The films' visual styles reflect differently framed ethics of spectators' witnessing distant, sexual, wartime violence. Before I turn to the films themselves, I first need to outline some of the complexities and controversies that arose around the practice of mass rape in the context of Yugoslav wars.

Mass rape, feminist interventions and the western humanitarian gaze

The horror of rape used as a weapon of war during the violent break-up of

Yugoslavia has been well documented and parsed in journalistic, legal, academic, historical, and feminist discourses. According to some estimates, between 20,000 and 50,000 women were systematically raped during the Bosnian war (1992-1995), although the exact number will likely never be known. Out of the known counts, the greatest number of victims were Bosniak Muslim women, and the perpetrators Bosnian Serb soldiers (de Brouwer, 2005). Few authorities dispute that in the Yugoslav succession wars mass rape was used as an instrument of ethnic cleansing (Stiglmayer 1994). In her book *Innocence and Victimhood* (2013), Elissa Helms details how soldiers imprisoned women as sex slaves, raped them daily, and often made particular efforts to impregnate them and not release them until their pregnancies were too advanced to be terminated. These practices, where biopolitics meets war crime, reflect a desire to "spoil" the perceived purity of the ethnic other, or rather to invade it through women's bodies. Such war crimes, premised on an unquestioned notion of ethnic purity, specifically link ethnicity to gender and sexual violence. Moreover, Helms documents the social stigma that many survivors of mass rape have encountered upon release, which made some of them unwilling to come forward to testify (and this is one of the main reasons why the precise number of victims is difficult to determine). The International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague (ICTY) tried a number of men for the crime (although many others remain at large), and one of its cases represents the first time that a person was convicted for using rape as a weapon of war.[2] Furthermore, Dubravka Žarkov's insightful work in *The Body of War* (2007) painstakingly documents how, during the Yugoslav wars, gender became not only a marker of ethnicity but also constitutive of it.



A documentary that opened the conversation about gender and sexual wartime violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina: *Calling the Ghosts* (Mandy Jacobson and Karmen Jelinčić, 1996)

The practice of mass rape sparked an early controversy among feminist scholars and activists. Catherine MacKinnon (1993, 1994) firmly aligned rapist tendencies with ethnic identity; moreover, she argued that the culture's saturation with pornography made Serbian men objectify women to such an extent that they could turn women into victims of systematic genocide (played out through rape). While MacKinnon helped bring this war crime to international prominence, she also a priori limited the conversation about sexual wartime violence by playing into the problematic local politics of ethno-nationalism. Some Yugoslav feminists called out MacKinnon for her tendency to simplify the issue. For example, Croatian feminist Vesna Kesić (1994) argued in her critical response that MacKinnon's interpretations did little to address sexual violence in a meaningful way and gave little explanation beyond positing ethnic animosity rooted in the imposition of normative gender roles. Moreover, because of MacKinnon's insistence on one-sided ethnic delineations between perpetrators and victims,

> "her work has become a part of the war propaganda which stirs ethnic hatred and promotes revenge, both of which often find expression in violence perpetrated by men against women" (Kesić: 268).



Calling the Ghosts (Mandy Jacobson and Karmen Jelinčić, 1996)

According to Kesić, MacKinnon's "approach demonizes Serbs and feminists" alike (1994: 274). It demonizes Serbs because, in MacKinnon's account, they seem collectively predisposed to violence. With such homogenizing claims

> "from the beginning of her involvement in this issue, [MacKinnon] has chosen to take an active part in this one-sided, nationalistic creation of an enemy" (275).

Importantly, according to Kesić, MacKinnon's account was highly damaging to the anti-war efforts of local feminists from all sides, because she sidelined their refusal to play into ethnic and nationalist identity politics as they criticized the region's sexual violence. In other words, prominent local feminists (from Croatia's Vesna Kesić, Slavenka Drakulić and Rada Iveković, to Serbia's activist group Women in Black) refused to play the numbers game and reduce their

condemnation of violence against women just to the question of either the victims or perpetrators' ethno-national belonging. In contrast, MacKinnon's view of events posited national and ethnic identities as central prisms through which to organize critical thinking about the gendered atrocities taking place. With this, argues Wendy Hesford,

> "MacKinnon is more interested in linking human rights violations (in this case, rape warfare) to her antipornography stance than in exploring these women's testimonials for what they say about the complexities of women's victimization, cultural location, and agency" (2011: 95).

As I show below, a similar dialectic informs the ways in which the female victim of mass rape is represented in one of the films I discuss in this essay, particularly with respect to cultural location and agency.



Mother and daughter in *Grbavica* (Jasmila Žbanić, 2006)

In 1996, Mandy Jacobson and Karmen Jelinčić made *Calling the Ghosts* (*Dozivanje duhova*), a documentary that focuses on the wartime abuse and torture of the women imprisoned in the notorious Omarska camp near the northern Bosnian town of Prijedor. In the film, the survivors openly struggle with the dilemma of whether to speak or stay silent. "If I speak, how good is that for me?" asks one of them. She concludes that it is important to speak up as a way to help those who remain imprisoned. It took several more years before local filmmakers tackled the issue of mass rape.



For Those Who Can Tell No Tales (Jasmila Žbanić, 2013)

Jasmila Žbanić's feature fiction debut *Grbavica* (2006) represents an intricate study of female survival in the wake of sexual wartime violence without perpetuating either ethnic or gender stereotypes (Jelača 2016). This Golden Bear-winning feature focuses on the aftermath of the war, where a rape camp survivor is raising the daughter she conceived during her forced stay at the camp, while attempting to conceal from her daughter the truth about her origin. Moreover, Žbanić tackles the issue from another perspective in her more recent *For Those Who Can Tell No Tales* (*Za one koji ne mogu da govore*, 2013). This time, an Australian traveller reenacts her trip to Višegrad, during which she unknowingly stayed at one of the infamous motels that served as rape camps during the war. Both of Žbanić's films tackle the aftermath of the conflict rather than depicting the events of the war directly. In that, the filmmaker is concerned with postwar silencing and denials, as well as the shaming that the female survivors have continuously faced during post-conflict times.



Three Windows and a Hanging (Isa Qosja, 2014)

Similalrly, a recent feature from Kosovo, Isa Qosja's *Three Windows and a Hanging* (2014), illuminates the social stigma that women survivors of wartime rape face in traditional patriarchal societies. The emergence of regional films that tackle this taboo topic is an important milestone towards coming to terms with the role of gender and sexual violence during war. Moreover, these films frequently refuse to graphically depict the spectacle of suffering, focusing on its aftermath instead.

Positioning the humanitarian gaze: situated vision vs. the all-knowing point of view

The ethical dilemmas that arise around the question of how and what we know about distant places, events and (victimized) people are not new. Nor is it shocking anymore to detect reductive bias in the formation of epistemologies about subjugated, victimized, and violated others. Quite the contrary, it has become the norm to expect such biases. At the same time, as Libby Saxton argues,

> "the act of contemplating others' suffering is not innately problematic, but rather those modes of representing and responding which instrumentalize this spectacle to shore up or naturalize the socio-political status quo" (66).

A point of view, as a way of framing discourse, dictates how we see, what we see, which elements our viewpoint obstructs and which it more firmly focuses on. As Judith Butler has noted, variously positioned frames of vision (which exclude as much as they include) become central to our understanding of the world (2009).

Explaining this phenomenon, Donna Haraway (1988) has used the metaphor of vision to argue for what she calls situated knowledges. Haraway says that objectivity is positional and always partial; understanding this should shape what counts as knowledge to begin with. Attempts to embody multiple points of view simultaneously and to cover many, or all, angles of the story (as traditional objectivity purports to do) merely mask the fact that to be everywhere also means to be nowhere in particular. As a result of trying for such "objectivity," people might miss a chance to acquire situated knowledge firmly rooted in the partiality and messy inconclusiveness of a lived experience. Haraway further argues that to critique pseudo-objectivity should not mean arguing that representation is impossible nor that all things, places, events, and people are relative. To wit, to critique the neocolonial humanitarian discourses centered around the figure of the witnessing celebrity, for instance, is not to dismiss or relativize the suffering witnessed. Rather, it is to complicate humanitarian discourse's many vectors and frames of representation. It requires a more complicated politics of recognition than humanitarianism's underlying rescue fantasies and good-versus-evil morality plays would allow for.

In what follows, I analyze the visual language and its narrative implications in *As If I Am Not There* and *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, two fiction films about wartime rape. In fact, the two films frequently position themselves quite differently vis-à-vis the aforementioned problems of gendered and ethnic norms or their undoing, as well as the politics of (im)partial vision. I approach the films without assuming that the filmmakers' "external gaze" or "outsider's perspective" are singular or one-sided states of mind that a priori imply inadequacy, separation, objectification, or an inevitably problematic point of view. Rather, in my understanding, the terms "external gaze" and "outsider's perspective" are unstable positionalities whose effects are not a forgone conclusion. Quite the contrary, they depend on a politics of recognition inscribed in each film's construction of meaning in intricate ways. The fact that both filmmakers are outsiders to the conflict that their films deal with—in that they did not experience the conflict firsthand—is not by any means the defining factor for the various levels of insight their respective films offer. The insider/outsider binary itself too often fixates on postulating the authenticity of experience as evidence, a notion that feminist historian Joan Scott critiques (1991). Moreover, in their production process, both films gained significant cooperation from local residents who did have firsthand experiences of the war, be they the survivors themselves, or members of the cast and crew, or both. As my analysis of the differences in their visual language shows, the two films nevertheless frequently reflect differing attitudes towards the inevitable limits of (im)partial vision.

In each film, the protagonist is a Bosniak Muslim woman forced into a rape camp, and in each story, the heroine develops a complicated, at times even romantically-inclined relationship with the camp's Serbian commander. The two films have



Samira, the protagonist of *As If I Am Not There*



Ajla and Danijel (*In the Land of Blood and Honey*)

significant narrative parallels, yet their visual treatments of the affective complexities experienced by the women who went through such horrifically traumatic wartime experiences diverge in important ways. In light of the aforementioned debates around the ethics of visually representing the pain of others, such differences in the films' visual grammar indicate differing approaches to this ethical problem. In *As If I Am Not There*, the protagonist, Samira, survives the ordeal. Moreover, she likely survives only because she deliberately develops a relationship with the camp commander and thus actively, if controversially, deploys her feminine traits as a survival skill. She is impregnated in the camp and gives birth later on, safely in exile somewhere in Sweden. Avoiding the child at first, in the film's sentimental final moments Samira takes the baby into her arms and starts breastfeeding. It is a tentative signal that she may accept this child as her own, no matter how much the baby reminds her of the traumatic circumstances of its conception.

In *In the Land of Blood and Honey* on the other hand, the heroine, Ajla, does not survive her ordeal but is rather killed by Danijel, her Serbian lover/captor, who then surrenders to the UN forces with the film's dramatic last words, "I am a criminal of war." Jolie's film thus ends with the Serb's admission of guilt for the atrocities committed, albeit too late for the heroine to be saved. And indeed, the heroine of *Blood and Honey* remains an elusive figure. She seems to harbor some feelings for Danijel (whom she has known since before the war) regardless of her capture. At the same time, the plot indicates that Ajla betrays Danijel towards the film's end by giving away his location to the resistance. When he narrowly survives an explosion, he storms her room and confronts her. She seems to admit the betrayal with a quiet: "I am sorry." These are her last words, as Danijel kills her with a gunshot to the head.

My analysis of both films follows Butler's argument in *Frames of War*, where she argues,

> "the 'frames' that work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot (or that produce lives across a continuum of life) not only organize visual experience but also *generate specific ontologies of the subject*" (3, emphasis mine).

I show how two initially similar films enact fairly different frames of recognition for their ensuing ontologies of the subject at hand. *As If I Am Not There,* which I will discuss in more detail later, deploys partial vision framed around gender performativity and its protagonist's subjective experience. It does not engage in rationalizing the origins of the conflict or offer historical explanation. *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, on the other hand, utilizes several overlapping and mutually informative frames: a Western humanitarian lens with its objective, all-seeing vision, and an interplay between two standard tropes—ancient hatreds and a multicultural utopian vision of pre-war Bosnia. I turn now to tracing the narrative trajectory of the latter film.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

In the Land of Blood and Honey

Images from *In the Land of Blood and Honey*:



In the Blood and Honey introduces its protagonist through visual doubling.



Ajla's auto portrait is the final image in the film.



The public rape scene and ....

In its opening image—a panning landscape shot of Bosnian countryside—*In the Land of Blood and Honey* immediately frames the region through a stereotypical Western framework of a "utopian multi-ethnic society." (Weine 1999: 1) Opening titles read:

> "Before the war, the republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina was part of one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Europe. Muslims, Serbs and Croats lived together in harmony."

Following the titles, Yugoslav rock band EKV's song "Zemlja" ("Country"), whose opening lyrics are "This country is for us/This country is for all our people," starts playing on the film's soundtrack as a way to allude sonically to the plot's attention to local detail. However, that attention to local detail soon gives way to an all-knowing cinematic vision in portraying the events that unfold. In particular, much of the narrative and visual positioning of wartime sexual violence in *In the Land of Blood and Honey* follows MacKinnon's path of collapsing ethnic and gender identities onto one another: Serb characters are almost exclusively male and violent; Bosniak characters are predominantly female, and largely helpless subjects to victimizing.

The film's introduction of its protagonist, Ajla, who is a painter, features an interesting visual doubling, as she is in the process of creating a self-portrait. This doubling will continue as a theme as Ajla struggles with painting a visual representation of herself (by extension, her portraiture traces how she retains a sense of self while the trauma in her captivity undoes that self image). Moreover, Ajla's auto portrait created during her captivity is the film's final shot. Her painted gaze breaks the fourth wall as if to charge the audiences with the ethical responsibility to witness the pain of those who are gone.

The film's first depiction of rape is a public spectacle that other imprisoned women are forced to watch. Right away, the emphasis is on the "we" of the women's shared experience as opposed to separation.



.... forced spectatorship of ....



.... the gathered women.



The camera effortlessly pans from ...



.... the women's confinement to ....

	
the captors' spaces.	The all-seeing camera shows ...
	
... the men's dynamic body language ...	... vs. the women's constraint.

The film's visual grammar conveys an all seeing and all knowing eye, as the camera effortlessly pans from the women's confined quarters to Danijel's office. Later on, the camera frequently pans across the Serb men's faces during their strategizing meetings, implicitly calling attention to the dynamics between them, but also to its own ability to move through this space unconstrained. Immediately after one such scene, the film cuts to the static shot of imprisoned women eating lunch, and through the juxtaposition, calls attention not just to the men's dynamic position versus the women's stasis, but also to its unrestricted access to both areas by way of an all-seeing gaze.







The events in *Blood and Honey* are presented with a studied, detached reserve. The all-seeing camera gaze dissects the events from a cold distance that purports to reflect comprehensive understanding rather than a sense of traumatic immediacy. In its access to all aspects of the experience (or rather, equal embodiment of both the victims' and perpetrators' point of view), what I call the film's humanitarian gaze appears to be imbued with impartial vision from Haraway's all-knowing "above." It is able to float above any and all spaces effortlessly, I suggest, precisely because it fashions for itself a privileged ethical position of an all-knowing, justice-driven objective observer whose dedication to humanitarian goals conceals an ideological slant.

Indeed, Angelina Jolie's directorial approach here has been likened to that of an objective academic researcher. Thus, in her reflections on the film to the UCLA's Center for the Study of Women, Denise Roman states:

> "I can now affirm that I consider Jolie a colleague in feminist research, with the film being a cinematic doctoral dissertation on the anthropology of war written on the bodies of women" (2012: 18).

What gets elided in such all-seeing cinematic construction are the ways in which Jolie's film relies on static notions of objectivity, access and legitimacy that often accompany the Western humanitarian gaze without scrutinizing the ways in which such an humanitarian gaze perpetuates the status quo of global inequality—



The overhead shots that further reflect the all seeing gaze (*In the Land of Blood and Honey*).

an ethical conundrum to which I turn in more detail later.

The film frequently features overhead shots, especially of the women's confinement. Its floating, omniscient, seemingly unlimited field of vision—which implies uninterrupted availability of an objective perspective to the spectator's gaze—is in stark contrast to Juanita Wilson's visual approach in *As If I Am Not There*.

As If I Am Not There

As If I Am Not There's events are depicted firmly from the female protagonist's constrained point of view; the perspective often aligns with her, frequently through low camera angles. Samira appears in every scene, and the spectator is not privy to any knowledge that is not available to the central protagonist, least of all to that of her captors. Her confinement becomes the organizing logic of the film's visual grammar. Moreover, the film's visual language—point of view shots, extreme close-ups and camera embodying the victim's physical perspective—draws the spectator in claustrophobically close to the events. Thus the film pulls the spectator inside the narrative viscerally and at times uncomfortably so.

Images from *As If I Am Not There*:





Collapsing time-space locations

The film opens with an immediate placing of the spectator into the visual language of traumatic recall. Samira is in the Swedish hospital in the present-day, having just given birth (and therefore, the majority of the film is structured as a traumatic flashback). In a quick succession of shots, we see Samira's wet face in agony (only later will we learn what the image stands for). The following shot takes us back to Samira's present, and to her taking a shower.

These close-ups convey a traumatic collapse of time-space locations, which frequently occurs in survivors' memories of horrific trauma (Caruth 1996). This silent opening sequence lays the groundwork for the film's persistent and claustrophobic positioning within Samira's point of view. That point of view, however, should not be mistaken for a direct invitation to spectatorial alignment with her plight. Rather than a simple process of spectatorial identification, the film nurtures a complicated structure of immediacy in bearing witness, yet always already too late in the moment of doing so. For instance, the opening sequence and its quick visual flashback to a traumatic event positions the protagonist's latency to trauma and the spectator's lateness to bearing witness on equal footing —but not as identical points of view.

Even the film's establishing landscape shots frequently show Samira or other camp women in the foreground, looking on. They are, therefore, devoid of perceived objectivity, by being framed as point-of-view shots in their own right.








Landscape shots channeled through the women's point of view




Obstructed vision

The doorframe narrows down Samira's options and the spectator's gaze.




Doorframes persistently narrow down the visual frame .






The women's confinement depicted with a low camera angle.

Moreover, the film's numerous shots of doors persistently depict them as points of confinement and obstructed vision rather than a way out of the situation. The camera frequently frames doors in a way that obscures vision and visually recalls Haraway's partial vision. For instance, in one shot, Samira observes captured Bosniak men led away for execution, as the doorframe simultaneously visually conveys their doomed fate and reflects Samira's (and the spectators') obstructed vision (the executions take place offscreen).

In another similar shot, as soldiers lead Samira into the house where she will be gang raped, the camera similarly frames her through doors that reflect the narrowing-down of her options, as well as an obstructed cinematic gaze.

A doorframe is again prominent in the scene in which Samira tends to the severely injured young girl, as well as in the film's final shot, in which Samira holds her newborn baby.

Moreover, during the women's confinement in the camp, doors are frequently seen in the background, strictly from the women's point of view, as reflected in the low camera angles. This creates a visual juxtaposition to *Blood and Honey*'s

establishing overhead shots of the women's quarters in the camp.

In further contrast to *In the Land of Blood and Honey*, *As If I Am Not There* depicts only the rape of its main protagonist, while the spectator, like Samira herself, does not know what happens to other women after they are led away (that not knowing is arguably more horrifying than graphic depiction). When they come back, the women do not talk about their brutalization but rather focus on caring for one another. Incidentally, this approach is reminiscent of how the women in the documentary *Calling the Ghosts* describe being led away to be raped and tortured, and later not telling each other what had happened as a way to protect one another.



Low camera angle frames the scene of Samira's rape.

This visual structure, embodying the protagonist's point of view, is particularly visceral in Samira's brutal gang rape scene, during which she eventually experiences disembodiment from her immediate physical trauma. She experiences a state of shock marked by an act of displaced spectatorship, whereby she *witnesses herself* being brutally violated.

The scene is established with a low-angle shot of Samira being led to the table where she will be brutalized.

At one point during the prolonged and unnervingly quiet rape scene, Samira turns her head and looks to the side, and the film cuts to a point-of-view shot of a fly on the wall.





The embodiment of Samira's point of view

This shot/reverse-shot is repeated twice. Each time, the film briefly muffles the diegetic sound of groaning men, conveying visually and sonically the extent of Samira's bodily and sensory disassociation. The scene also features a slow-motion shot through the window that depicts men playing soccer—an image meant to convey Samira's dissociation from such a seemingly mundane activity.





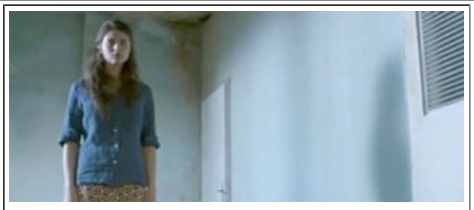
Samira's out-of-body experience

Her disembodiment in the moment of extreme trauma is, in a seeming jump cut, then transformed into a shot in which she stands in the background while the men urinate in the foreground. At first it appears that Samira is put against the back wall and made to observe the men urinating. The following shot, however, reveals that the men are urinating on Samira, and that the seeing figure in the background conveys Samira's experiencing the brutalization as an out-of-body event.

The latter shot is also visually tied to one of the film's opening images, whose meaning is now revealed. In the rape sequence, Samira watches herself—the same way that the spectator is watching her being brutally gang raped—as if she is "not there," conveying an experience of trauma referenced in the film's title. Then the watching figure slowly approaches and wipes away blood from the brutalized Samira's face.

During these shots, the sound is again muffled until it is suddenly interrupted by a male voice that says, "Get up. You have more entertaining to do." Samira is then hit in the face, and the film cuts to a completely black screen that lasts several seconds. This is followed by a blurry panning shot of Samira's arm. When the

camera reaches her face—eyes closed—the lens refocuses, and then again cuts to black.





In traumatic disassociation, Samira watches herself being brutalized



The aftermath of brutality

With this unsettling sequence, *As If I Am Not There* resists a spectacular fetishizing of violence by pointing to *the crisis of witnessing* (Felman & Laub 1992) as a way to simultaneously overrule the split between the victim and the spectator, and double the gaze in a way that calls overt attention to the ethical dimensions of seeing the scene unfold. Rather than inviting the spectator to identify with the victim, the scene conveys what Dominick LaCapra has called "empathic unsettlement" (2001)—a process of bearing witness that does not privilege identification but rather the unsettling of identity and subjectivity as such. The film renders identification impossible here by depicting a victim disassociated from her own subjectivity.

Moreover, to evoke Wendy Hesford's assessment of the ethics of witnessing in her analysis of *Calling the Ghosts*,

> "although the film shows us victimized bodies, we also see bodies surviving their wounds" (115).



The perpetrator point of view

The same thing can be argued about *As If I Am Not There*, which ultimately focuses on survival more than on the spectacle of suffering. As noted before, the entire film visually conveys events from the female victim's point of view, and embodies a perpetrator's visual perspective only in a few rare instances. Even then, the spectator's empathic unsettlement is squarely with the female protagonist, who is rendered vulnerable through this visual placement of the soldier above the civilians.

This disconcertingly immediate apparatus of vision collapses objective visual separation and places the spectator firmly within the brutalized woman's experience of bodily disassociation. In this way, the narrative traces rape and torture in *As If I Am Not There* as having such a traumatic impact that they not only disassociate Samira from herself but also dislocate a sense of linear and

literal storytelling by doubling the gaze. That is, we see a woman brutally assaulted, but we also see her *seeing herself* being brutally assaulted; the experience is so deeply traumatic that she is transplanted outside of her own body. With this, the film makes the spectator briefly embody, uncomfortably and claustrophobically, Samira's traumatized point of view, all the while acknowledging such a devastating event's limits of knowability. Since our own viewing of the scene cannot be firmly objective and decoupled from the victim's disassociated point of view, the scene calls overt attention to the visual politics of witnessing. Here, trauma is simultaneously made knowable and unknowable. As the spectator briefly experiences the victim's point of view, that point of view is impossible to fully grasp, since the victim herself experiences gang rape in a highly dissociated, out-of-body physical and emotional state.

Victims often perceive trauma as a break in temporal and spatial continuity, as time stopping, slowing down, or being otherwise interrupted, and with a temporal remove of the conscious assimilation of impact. It feels as if the traumatic injury is not happening to the person experiencing it—which it is not inasmuch as it displaces the sense of what a "self" is to begin with (Laub 1995). Wilson's film depicts the ways in which bodily invasion and injury displace a sense of identity and break the continuity of unaltered subjectivity, most notably in the aforementioned gang rape scene, which marks the initial invasion of Samira's body. However, while traumatic shock blunts Samira after she is brutalized, or after having witnessed the brutalization of others, at other times, she is compassionate and caring for her fellow prisoners, as well as calculating in her deliberate manipulation of femininity as a survival skill. Consequently, in *As If I Am Not There*, flat affect becomes a way to convey the enormity of bodily and mental injury that overwhelms the sense of "I," precisely because the film saves it for the moments when the heroine suffers the most. At those points the spatial and especially temporal displacement signals to the spectator the enormity of an experiential break in the sense of the self that extreme trauma causes. With this intimate framing of the protagonist's traumatized point of view, as well as in its calling attention to the act of spectatorship in the moment of extreme trauma, Wilson's film, I suggest, largely avoids the pitfalls of depicting the events on screen with an observed detachment and all-seeing objective gaze. It persistently embodies the partial vision of the female victim's point of view, as it points to her inability to fully grasp her own trauma at the time of its occurrence.

The differences in the visual languages of *In the Land of Blood and Honey* and *As If I Am Not There* that I discussed so far are not mere aesthetic variations. Instead, they carry important ethical implications. In the following sections, I show how these aesthetic and formal cinematic elements convey the films' differing approaches to gender as either predetermined identity or as performativity. And their contrast also points to a troubling politics of recognition disguised under the veil of humanitarianism.

Engendering masculinity and ethnicity

The nameless captain in *As If I Am Not There*, with whom Samira deliberately develops an intimate relationship, claims in one scene that there is not much difference between Samira and him: they each do what they need to survive. Certainly, they live within a clear gendered and ethnic power imbalance at the time he says this. And he inadvertently admits to his power by claiming that Samira would "suck his cock" right there and then if that meant she'd survive. At the same time, the captain's statement provides valuable insight into his own performance of masculinity, which by implication takes this extreme form out of necessity. His masculinity does not exist as an a priori violent inclination, nor does the film reductively assign it to how Serbian men "traditionally" are: violent



Acknowledging gender performativity: Samira and the Captain

and inevitably murderous as they seek to guarantee the perpetuation of their national greatness. Rather than depicting widespread masculinist violence as an inherent trait, the captain's statement points to the complicated structures by which perpetuation of violence gradually becomes a way of belonging and not standing out for a man in dire wartime circumstances.

With such attention on perpetrator trauma, *As If I Am Not There* points to its often unacknowledged presence, and moreover suggests potentially uncomfortable links between the traumas of perpetrators and victims. All are caught in the cycle of violence perpetuated for the sake of gendered norms interpellated under ethno-nationalist ideology. With this, the film poses a challenge to the problematic assumption that atrocities stem, simply and flatly, from a whole group of people's inherently violent predisposition rooted in a burden to perpetuate heroic tradition. Rather, a culture of violence stems from the gradual (perhaps sudden, but always gradual) wartime recalibration of normative masculinity, that in this case converges on the practice of mass rape, which in turn becomes a norm by which both masculinity and ethnicity are socially measured. For the Serbian men in the camp, rape becomes an enactment of gender performativity by which they can confirm both their manliness and ethno-national belonging. The captain feels equally a captive of this vicious circle of masculinist performativity as Samira is a captive of his (and thus his words: "We are both the same, we'd do anything to survive"). Thus the film provides a telling commentary on the complexities that follow any occurrence of sexual violence, especially in its more widespread iterations and their relation to the individuals affected.

In *Blood and Honey*, the complicated assemblages that inform the performances of wartime masculinity are approached from the perspective of an Oedipal struggle that makes Danijel turn a blind eye to the atrocities committed by his unit, and then compels him to kill his Muslim lover partly because his father refuses to accept their romance. Here, Elissa Helms finds that the film "fails to challenge conventional gendered narratives of collective identities and moral righteousness" (2014: 613). While Danijel is the camp's commander, he does not rape any prisoners and puts Ajla under his protection. At the same time, Danijel does not do much to prevent other prisoners from being tortured and raped, and he seems to only passively disapprove of their treatment, or otherwise rationalize it as inevitable. His father, Nebojša, on the other hand, is an openly hostile, powerful Serbian general who rationalizes ethnic cleansing and war crimes with an expository dialogue about the greatness of the Serbian nation and its historical struggles. This focus on Serbian tradition as generative of violent attitudes towards ethnic others gives rape an aura of inevitability, which is further strengthened when Danijel himself finally succumbs to the violent impulse by killing Ajla. In an earlier exchange, that aura of tradition and inevitability is tacitly addressed by the couple, when Ajla asks Danijel if he always wanted to be a police officer (his profession before the war), to which he answers:

> "Some of us don't have a choice. For me all this was a part of a very long family tradition."

The family tradition he is referring to here extends well beyond his profession; it is about the embodiment of violent Serbian masculinity, which Jolie's film largely treats as inescapable. Try as he may to resist it, Danijel succumbs by killing Ajla, thereby fulfilling his father's wishes and contributing to the project of ethnic cleansing. In one expository conversation, Danijel's father reminds his son about the greatness of the Serbian nation that extends back to the Kosovo battle (one of the founding myths of Serbian nationalism). The father then orders him to "finish cleansing" his area, and affectionately sends him off with: "Make your father proud"—as the latter two activities are implied to be one and the same thing, and

Images from *In the Land of Blood and Honey*:







General Nebojša Vukojević in an Oedipal struggle with his son, and toasting "To Serbs."



Danijel surrenders to his fate

overtly connected to securing the continued greatness of said nation.

Like the captain in *As If I Am Not There*, Danijel feels the pressure to conform to gendered expectations, and that translates into him perpetuating ethnic violence. The difference lies, however, in the fact that in *As If I Am Not There*, the perpetuation of violence is examined primarily through the lens of gender performativity without overt focus on Serbianness as such, while in *Blood and Honey*, the perpetuation of violence is squarely and unequivocally connected to ethnicity as the privileged site of explanation. Moreover, Danijel's struggle is locked within a firm Oedipal framework of fathers and sons, heritage and familial-ethnic tradition. Says Danijel by way of explanation:

> "I find this war very difficult to stomach. But my father… general Vukojević, thinks very differently of course."

This larger-than-life father, general Nebojša Vukojević, is depicted as a character who acts out in a genocidal rage due to his own childhood trauma when Muslims murdered his mother and siblings during WWII. Moreover, his ethnic animosity has class overtones, as he resents Ajla's, and "Muslim ladies'" soft hands, which indicate to him that they never had to "work the land" the way that his mother did.

As in the work of Catherine MacKinnon, *Blood and Honey*'s subtext is the inevitability of masculinist tradition when it comes to the Serbs' infamy. Both accounts flatly homogenize an ethnic group in its entirety into an exclusively male, unambiguously heterosexual, violent and largely rural community. Indeed, rarely do such accounts leave room for variety within the group. Even Danijel, who morally struggles with such violence, eventually commits it himself. In Jolie's film, ethnic identity is unquestionably assumed to *exist prior to violence taking place*, and is its catalyst.

On the other hand, in *As If I Am Not There*, ethnicity is a largely unspoken byproduct of the performative nature of violent masculinity. With that, Juanita Wilson's film poses a rare instance where ethno-sexual violence is examined as a situational practice reiterated by men as a way to confirm their group belonging—be it ethnic or gendered, or, in most cases, a complicated combination of the two. While *Blood and Honey* gets uncomfortably close to the notion that Serbian masculinist violence is traditionally inescapable, in *As If I Am Not There*, that same violence is positioned as situational and performative, through the proposition that men perpetrate sexual violence in other to comply to the norms of warring masculinity. The situational exploitation of such forms of violent behavior becomes the driving force for its perpetuation, regardless of ethnicity—which is reiterated, even constituted, in its wake rather than existing as an unquestionably stable category ahead of the occurrence of violence. The captain articulates quite overtly his understanding that he participates in violence because it allows him to survive in a world where violent masculinist behavior has become the norm of those who (temporarily) stay on top. *As If I Am Not There* thus points to the incessant tightening of wartime gender performativity to such an extreme extent that the perpetuation of violence becomes generative of ethnic identity as such, rather than the other way around.

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Embodying femininity as ...



.... a survival mechanism (*As If I Am Not There*)

Female precarity through an humanitarian ocular epistemology

The politics of representing gender in sexual wartime violence are treated fairly differently in the two films when it comes to women as well. In *As If I Am Not There*, Samira, after recovering from initial shock, starts dressing up in order to present herself as more desirable to the camp men, much to the dismay of other imprisoned women.

After she recovers from the initial shock of bodily brutalization and witnesses several fellow-inmates dying (including a very young girl), Samira resolves to not wait passively to be brutalized to death. Rather, she puts on a persona of a seductress, manipulative in her application of both make-up and feminine attributes. Even though some of her fellow inmates judge her badly for doing this, in a way, she also becomes a problem-solver who refuses to passively accept her doomed fate. Her characterization provocatively runs against the grain of the dominant representations of female Bosnian victims of sexual violence as passive and silenced. Samira consciously manipulates femininity as a means to try to survive her ordeal. That she thinks she can survive by manipulating her femininity is a tragic reminder of the limited and limiting gender roles available to women as a form of survival during a time of war. For Samira, enacting exaggerated femininity also allows her to regain some of her sense of an "I" that had been traumatically displaced through sexual abuse and torture. Gender traits are here again overtly called attention to. After she puts on makeup, another imprisoned woman remarks:

> "You look ridiculous."
> "I look like myself," responds Samira.
> Another woman then warns: "The soldiers will go crazy after you now."
> Samira: "It's not for them. This is for me, for who I am. A woman. And they are not soldiers. Just men."

In this, *As If I Am Not There* provides a provocative departure from standard norms of representing victimized women from "far away" conflict zones. The film does not render Samira's plight in simplistic terms and according to normative gender tropes about female passivity. On the contrary, her survival instinct in the midst of grave trauma jolts her into a deliberate, conscious exaggeration of her femininity, whereupon she engages in a form of gender masquerade in order to seduce the Serbian captain.

By carrying on a sexual relationship with the captain, Samira calculates that it increases her own chances of survival (it also gives her access to more food for other imprisoned women). Her act exposes gender's impossible double bind: namely, Samira is brutalized to begin with because she is a Bosniak Muslim woman, but she is kept alive only because she is a woman (captured Bosniak men are killed without hesitation). Her sex and gender then become both the condition of her torture and of her survival. She survives but so do several of her fellow inmates who did not exploit femininity this way to their own "advantage." She seems to have insulated herself from more physical harm; after she becomes the captain's mistress, other men in the camp do not rape her anymore. Samira's story and her manipulation—or masquerade—of gender as a means of survival

reveal the feminine conundrum without merely reducing it to a morality play about an inextricable, predictive interplay between static gender and ethnic identities. Quite the contrary, the film does not present Samira and her fellow inmates' plight through a totalizing humanitarian gaze that requires justice to be brought to light through objective exposition or foreign intervention. Rather, *As If I Am Not There* unfolds more as a devastating snapshot—neither fully representative nor entirely atypical—of a war that destroyed many lives, both male and female, across various ethnic lines of division.



Women as noble sufferers and tragic heroes: Ajla's sister losing her baby and ....

In the Land of Blood and Honey, on the other hand, sees Ajla become a member of the resistance and return to the camp after briefly escaping, in order to be an informant for Bosniak resistance. And while this narrative similarly emphasizes the woman's active role, Ajla's arc is here rendered in heroic rather than performative terms. Framed as a tragic hero, Ajla dies as a hero when Danijel executes her upon realizing her betrayal. In that inevitability of doom, the film runs the risk of displacing the particularity of Ajla's plight for a universalizing framework of female suffering and heroism. With an emphasis on the tropes of heroic suffering and tragic self-sacrifice, the film retorts to the Western humanitarian gaze that frequently casts women either as noble sufferers or tragic heroes (or both).

This film is, therefore, positioned less as an inspection of traumatic affect that (re)produces gender roles for both men and women, and much more as an overtly political, activist work of humanitarian filmmaking that purports to have a didactic role (a point reiterated by Angelina Jolie's statements during the film's promotion). As the film's most visible face during its promotion, Jolie frequently emphasized the "universal nature" of the story ("a love story tragically interrupted by war") as well as her desire to have her film "educate" the Western audiences about this "little known" conflict.[3] [open notes in new window] The director is



.... Ajla's death scene in *In the Land of Blood and Honey*

hence positioned here not only as a humanitarian, but also as a producer of important new knowledge about the "far away" conflict. What is more, in her interviews Jolie frequently used the film as an opportunity to criticize Western inaction when it came to this bloody conflict, claiming that the foreign intervention came to Bosnia too late. The film itself contains several tacit instances of this critique, conveyed through news reports about Western inactivity, as well as the film's closing titles, which round out the ontological circle within which the film is framed. The end titles start with:

> "For three and a half years, the international community failed to decisively intervene and stop the war in Bosnia."

By comparison, Juanita Wilson insisted on the partiality of the story presented in *As If I Am Not There*. Asked if the film is Irish or Bosnian (the film's cast is local), she said:

> "Well, it's an Irish film in the sense that it was developed in Ireland and I'm Irish and the producer is Irish, so I would consider it an Irish film about a Bosnian story. But it's not trying to describe the war by any means because being Irish I couldn't do that accurately, so it's really just following one human story."

Moreover, Wilson added that she was most interested in depicting the notion that

> "the complexity of a war situation like that is that [Samira] does whatever she feels like she has to do to survive, but also a lot of the men who become soldiers, their lives are destroyed as well, a lot of them have no choice either. And I think that's important as well to understand, that it's not just simplistically male and female roles, but that it's really the circumstances"[4]

Wilson's attention to the specifics of local circumstances does not relativize the devastation of violence but rather calls attention to the spectrum of gender roles whose shifts mark a turn to injury and constitute ethnicity as such.

It is important to consider here the fact that throughout these external positionalities of the films' differing approaches to gender politics and the politics of recognition, an important layer is the humanitarian/interventionist angle ascribed to *Blood and Honey*, and channeled through the celebrity of its director and scriptwriter. Through its director's larger-than-life celebrity humanitarian persona, the film received wide publicity that established it as one of the internationally most prominent films about the Bosnian war. Moreover, the film's critical reception was frequently associated with the director's celebrity humanitarian persona as well—namely, the film has largely been understood as an organic extension of Jolie's humanitarian work. With this merging of Western humanitarian discourses and cinematic dramatization, *Blood and Honey* can be seen as an exercise in cinematic humanitarianism, or humanitarian cinema, that purports to bring to the attention of Western audiences the pain of distant others. The filmmakers conceive of these projects as a way to instigate humanitarian efforts constituted around the unquestioned notion of the West saving the Rest. In that sense, the film embodies the Western humanitarian gaze and its sovereignty over the discourses of universal human rights.

The reception of *Blood and Honey* by the Anglophone film critics has greatly



Angelina Jolie directing *In the Land of Blood and Honey*

concentrated on Jolie's overall humanitarian efforts as a primary prism through which the film is to be viewed.[5] However, celebrity humanitarian activism does not stand in a vacuum outside of the transnational hierarchies of power that position certain regions as always needing to be rescued (from themselves, as it were) and cast Western optics of representational and military intervention as the rescuers (Atanasoski 2014). These optics of power have shaped Western humanitarianism into a "politics of pity" (Chouliaraki 2012: 2), that turns suffering (which is always distant, never close to home) into a spectacle. As Lilie Chouliaraki argues:

> "The celebrity seeks to conceal a scandalous contradiction: by appearing to care for the 'wretched of the earth' whilst enjoying the privilege of rare wealth, he or she glosses over the ongoing complicity of the West in a global system of injustice that reproduces the dependence of the developing world through acts of charity." (4)

Jolie's humanitarian moment, Chouliaraki argues, is marked by a dynamic within which the celebrity herself becomes hyper-centralized in a theater of pity that is Western humanitarianism, framed as an authentic carrier of expertise about the suffering Others.[6] Positioned this way, the celebrity engages in the "performance of the voice of suffering as if it were the celebrity's own" and thus

> "confession collapses the voice of the sufferer—invisible, distant, unnamed—with the voice of the celebrity—visible, 'intimate,' and world-famous—and displaces the affective relationship between spectator and sufferer onto a relationship between spectator and celebrity as the most 'authentic' figure of pity" (15).

This displacement of identification reorganizes the field of empathy in such a way that the crux of the affective exchange takes place between the spectator and the celebrity, the sufferer acting merely as a conduit.

Similarly, in *Spectacular Rhetorics*, Wendy Hesford examines

> "an ocular epistemology" of Western human rights discourses in order to show "how the visual field of human rights internationalism often functions as a site of power for and normative expression of American nationalisms, cosmopolitanisms, and neoliberal global politics" (2011: 3).

In that sense, the humanitarian framing of *Blood and Honey*, coupled with its ocular epistemology of the all-knowing above, positions the film as a direct extension of Western humanitarian ideology (neocolonialist and neoliberal in its application) in its insistence on the necessity of Western interventions as rescue scripts, the educational detachment of its own politics, the "elsewhere" nature of conflict, the erasure of gray areas, and the treatment of violence as traditionally inherent in entire (far away) ethnic groups. In this model of humanitarianism, suffering is static, its victims portrayed as largely helpless to do anything to relieve it except wait for Western saviors to come rescue them. Such discourses

> "include a dialectical politics of recognition caught up in the logic and legacies of Western imperialism parading under the cloak of international humanitarianism and human rights advocacy" (Hesford 3).

In its all seeing humanitarian approach to ocular epistemology, *In the Land of Blood and Honey* extends these politics of recognizing the pain of others without problematizing the uneven flows of power/knowledge that are channeled through a humanitarian knowledge-lens that often perpetuates rather than alleviates global inequality. Indeed, according to research conducted by Volčić and Erjavec about *Blood and Honey*'s reception in Bosnia-Herzegovina:

> "[T]he film's story of war rapes and suffering did little to raise awareness about war rape victims generally and was interpreted primarily within two discursive frameworks: celebrity and ethno-nationalistic ones that tend to reinforce the status quo in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina and perpetuate misunderstandings about war crimes. Jolie's activism, in other words, did not contribute to the reconciliation between different ethnicities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but has, on the contrary, further fostered polarization that continues to plague the region." (2015: 356)

Women have typically been the most recognizable faces of the humanitarian spectacle of suffering, from Sudan to Afghanistan to Bosnia-Herzegovina. The representation of female agency in such accounts of conflict zones has been questionably simplified at best and premised on problematic Western rescue fantasies at worst. Women in conflict zones are most often seen as the ones in need of rescue, passive victims of masculinist violence without any agency in their own right, unable to do much to change their circumstances themselves. To continue to insist on such a simplified approach to sexual violence is to reduce it to a caricature, neglecting its more complicated angles such as the instability of normative gender performances. On the other hand, to institute this kind of narrative instability might allow for such incidents—inconsistent with the neoliberal humanitarian model of reductive dichotomizing—as having male characters who do not embody violent masculinity or women who in turn do, and so on along the sliding scale of gender performativity.

Conclusion: on the inevitability of obstructed vision

Donna Haraway speaks decisively in words we can apply to the ocular epistemologies about the pain of others:

> "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity." (Haraway 589)

How knowledge is claimed, framed and positioned more widely is at issue now when empathy is circulated as an exercise in accumulating cultural capital for the civilizationally developed (where up for visual consumption are those who inhabit the perpetually "developing" parts of the world). Especially at stake, yet again, is the resulting knowledge about the subjugated and suffering other—here, a sexually brutalized woman. This suffering other has become a prominently focus of Western-based humanitarianism and its reiteration of the traditional geopolitical hierarchies along the developed/developing scale of civilizational

achievement.

However, as I have shown here, the outcome of that representational apparatus is not determined a priori and depends on how ocular epistemologies are framed—from a partial perspective that concedes one's own role in the mechanisms that perpetuate global inequality, or in a privileged and distanced positioning from the all-knowing above. In analyzing media culture, we need to start by acknowledging that humanitarian ocular epistemologies can easily (even inadvertently) perpetuate the global flows of inequality when it comes to the dissemination of power/knowledge. To develop an ethics of witnessing requires being attuned to an understanding that detached representation is not an a priori act of humanitarian benevolence. Nor does humanitarian benevolence inoculate one from perpetuating the troubling civilizational assumptions hiding behind Western politics of recognition. Libby Saxon argues that "how we view has consequences":

> "spectators are not isolated from the spheres of ethical action and accountability, but .. our privileges – including the privilege of looking – are linked to others' suffering in ways we need to actively interrogate" (74).

In this essay, I examined two cinematic texts about the privileges of looking at the same conflict that have many parallels between them. My goal in doing so was to trace the intricate differences within their frames and their ocular epistemologies about the pain of others. The ethics of witnessing the pain of others is simultaneously a heightened moral imperative of today's technologically interconnected world, and a stark reminder that the mapping of some geographies remains locked within the frames of suffering that freeze them into extremely static notions about gender and ethnic identity. There is an urgent ethical need to apprehend the act of looking in terms of its (limited, framed) position, since the ensuing epistemology makes all the difference in our efforts to arrive at non-essentializing, incomplete, always complicated—and sometimes contradictory—accounts of knowing about the lives of others and witnessing their pain. These accounts are inevitably partial and situational, bound by contextual aspects that perpetually obstruct clear vision, especially when hegemonic representations attempt to conceal that partial vision and replace it with all seeing objectivity. If, as Haraway has argued, "only partial perspective promises objective vision" (583), then acknowledging the inevitability of obstructed vision is a good place to start in developing a new ethics of witnessing—or rather, a new ethics of being empathically unsettled by the pain of others.

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Notes

1. With respect to the ethics of documentary filmmaking, see also Pryluck, C. (1976). Ultimately we are all outsiders: the ethics of documentary filming. *Journal of the University Film Association*, 21-29; Ruby, J. (1977). The image mirrored: reflexivity and the documentary film. *Journal of the University Film Association*, 3-11; Boltanski, L. (1993). *Distant suffering: Morality, media and politics*. Cambridge University Press; Zimmerman P. (2000), *States of Emergency: Documentaries, Wars, Democracies*, The University of Minnesota Press; Piotrowska, A. (2014). *Psychoanalysis and ethics in documentary film*. New York: Routledge. [return to text]

2. http://www.haguejusticeportal.net/index.php?id=6082

3. http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/in_the_land_of_blood_and_honey/trailers/11160846/ [return to page 3]

4. http://www.filmfestivals.com/blog/vanessa_mcmahon/as_if_i_am_not_there_interview_with_juanita_wilson

5. From Manohla Dargis' *NYT* review: "This is Ms. Jolie's directing debut — she also wrote and co-produced the movie — and there's a somewhat awkward instructional, at times almost proselytizing aspect to the story that seems of a piece with her laudable humanitarian work." (Published on December 22, 2011)

6. See also Kapoor, Ilan. *Celebrity humanitarianism: The ideology of global charity*. Routledge, 2012; Littler, Jo. ""I feel your pain": cosmopolitan charity and the public fashioning of the celebrity soul." *Social semiotics* 18.2 (2008): 237-251, and Yrjölä, Riina. "The global politics of celebrity humanitarianism." *Transnational Celebrity Activism in Global Politics Changing the World* (2011): 175-192.

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http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/TortureDocumentaries/

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Želimir Žilnik's unemployed bodies

by Greg de Cuir Jr

Part 1: Photo essay of *The Unemployed* (Nezaposleni ljudi, 1968), dir. Želimir Žilnik



The fractured body of the text in the opening credits foreshadows the broken-down bodies of the workers.



The words become an abstract mass…



…like the extreme close-ups of body parts that structure the film.



The first interview subject we meet offers visible evidence of his injured body and the dehumanizing nature of manual labor.



The second interview subject questions the meaning of socialism while his hands are framed and emphasis given to the matchbox he holds and the watch he wears.



The time of day is also evoked in this shot, lending the film a sense of urgency.



Workers on the march, rushing through a transportation hub.



Feet become a structuring motif in this film, usually bruised and dirty.



In this odd image the worker's feet seem imprisoned, framed against the bars of the bed and tied down at the ankles.



These feet are liberated, but only on the backs of other workers.



Those backs are generally strong, muscular, able to bear many burdens.



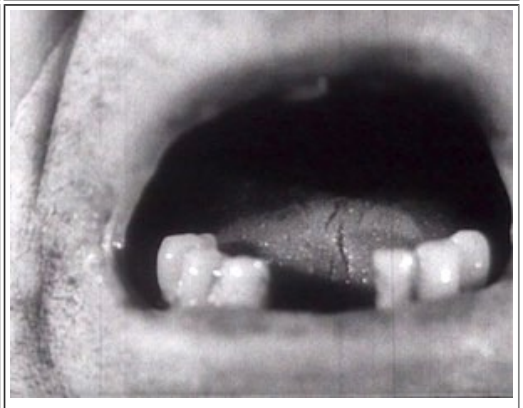
Still, the burden takes its toll.



Sleep is a priceless commodity.



Food is not.



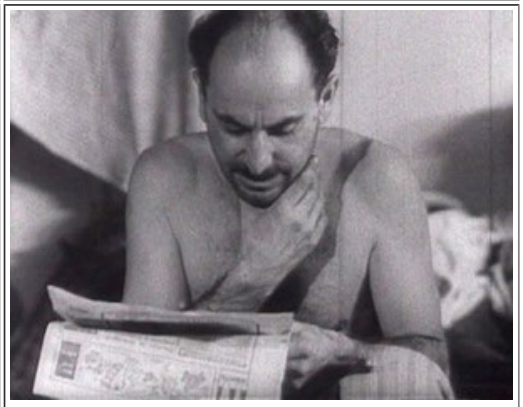
Chewing is difficult.



Swallowing is even hard work.



Unemployment and obesity are mutually exclusive.



Searching the classifieds brings little relief.

		
The unemployed are ultimately stripped bare, though cleansed for their continued struggle.	Closing credits.	

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Želimir Žilnik's unemployed bodies

by Greg de Cuir Jr

Želimir Žilnik is a filmmaker who has shown a consistent interest in the situation of the working class in his native (ex-Yugoslav) territory as well as the situation of migrant workers in a variety of locales. His cinema takes stock of the disenfranchised and the disregarded in an effort to expose the blind spots and injustice produced by official state ideology and politics. Žilnik has always been a chronicler and crusader for those who are not empowered to tell their own stories or show their own images. He is a humanist, what the film theoretician Nicole Brenez would perhaps call an "internationalist," in the sense of those who take their cameras across borders to help people in various struggles. This essay will consider Žilnik's short documentary film *The Unemployed* (Nezaposleni ljudi, 1968), particularly with regard to its depictions of workers' bodies. *The Unemployed* is an eight-minute documentary that narrates the situation of workers who are living in a dormitory between jobs as they ponder the need to leave Yugoslavia and enter West Germany as *gastarbeiters* (guestworkers). Many of the workers speak about the physical toll that work has taken on their bodies as well as the general lack of stability in their working situation. A picture is painted of workers who are exploited and undervalued, which is at odds with the mythical glorification of labor as a norm in the socialist ideology that governed Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe at the time.

The 1960s was a golden age in Socialist Yugoslavia; a period of openness had blossomed as a result of governmental actions that had been undertaken in the previous decade. In the cinematic arts New Film (Novi Film) appeared in 1961 with a new generation of filmmakers who practiced the principles of freedom of expression in both form and content. This new wave of filmmakers included Boštjan Hladnik, Ante Babaja, Bata Čengić, Puriša Djordjević, Žilnik, and many others. *The Unemployed* was screened at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival where Žilnik won the Grand Prix, which cemented his status as a promising director. That promise was realized only a year later when Žilnik won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival for his debut feature *Early Works* (Rani radovi, 1969). Some of Žilnik's other memorable films treating the issues of labor and the working class include

- *Inventory* (Inventur—Metzstrasse 11, 1975), a short structural documentary experiment that takes stock of guest workers living at a particular address in West Germany;
- *The Way Steel was Tempered* (Tako se kalio čelik, 1988), a television feature that details the rise and fall of a steel mill worker and the ultimate capitalist take-over of factories in socialist Europe;
- *Marble Ass* (Dupe od mramora, 1995), a feature that explores the fate of sex workers, paying special attention to transsexual bodies; also
- *Old School Capitalism* (Stara škola kapitalizma, 2009), a feature that documents workers' demonstrations in post-socialist Serbia as well as the occupation of factories by workers.

In order to establish the wider context for this work, I will sketch the key events of the postwar era in Yugoslavia that ultimately structured the 1960s. On 27 June 1950, Yugoslavia's Law on the Management of State Economic Associations by Work Collectives, establishing self-management in the workplace, was introduced with the goal to decentralize all segments of the economy and society. Daniel Jakopovich described it as the paving of a "truly anti-Stalinist alternative road,"[1] [open endnotes in new window] which resulted from the Cominform expelling Yugoslavia as a member, also the Tito/Stalin split in 1948. However, as Jakopovich further noted,

> "This third way between central planning and conventionally understood 'market socialism' remained only an abstract possibility, as did the prospect for democratic socialism in general."[2]

In his monumental study *Yugoslavia as History*, John Lampe wrote that from 1953 until 1961 Yugoslavia's economy grew at a faster pace than most others in the world, including those of the Soviet bloc.[3] This economic boom was followed by a period of stagnation and regression spurred on by a number of factors, both internal and external, which were points of contention for many intellectuals and state officials. Suffice to say, as Lampe does,

> "The period from 1963 to 1966 witnessed the most intensive political debate over economic reform in the history of the second Yugoslavia."[4]

This intense debate led to the general economic reform of 1965, which Lampe considers "the most ambitious set of market-oriented changes undertaken anywhere in the Communist world prior to 1989."[5]

The economic reform of 1965 aimed to find a solution for the growing inequities between the various Yugoslav republics (Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and two autonomous provinces located within Serbia—Kosovo and Vojvodina) as well as to increase standards of living for the large rural population. The number of Yugoslav guest workers in Western Europe increased from 50,000 to 280,000 by 1968.[6] Lampe feels that during this particular time the main concern of Yugoslavs centered on individual efforts to study or work in an expanding, modernizing economy. Lampe goes on to state,

> "Yugoslav enterprises were already inordinately large and overstaffed. They now faced a labor market that continued to swell during the 1970s due to the postwar baby boom and reduced opportunities to work in Western Europe."[7]



Workers's bodies

The economic situation quickly soured, as 300,000 guest workers returned to Yugoslavia by the 1970s while the number of registered unemployed doubled for the years 1971-75.[8]

****

The Unemployed is a sensuous film about workers' bodies that also offers a critique on socialist realism and history, especially as it affected workers. Socialist ideology in the 20th century was often incarnated in the aesthetic form of socialist realism. The novelist Maxim Gorky outlined the tenets of socialist realism in a pamphlet written on the occasion of the 1934 Soviet writers' congress. In short, the genre was intended to be programmatic, optimistic, and educational in relation to the working class and depictions of workers. The critic Boris Groys wrote,

> "The specificity of socialist realism therefore lay not at a level

> susceptible to formal analysis, but rather at the level of its contextual work with form."[9]

This contextual work often made use of folklore and other elements of mass culture for the purposes of the "industrialization of the mind," as Hans Magnus Enzensberger would describe it.

Socialist realism as a doctrine was promulgated to the satellite states of the Soviet Union in the postwar era. The film industry in Yugoslavia was founded upon these tenets, resulting in what I have described elsewhere as "Partisan realism"[10] — a unique genre of war film that generally perpetuated the founding myth of Yugoslavia, with Josip Broz Tito as the leader of an army and a nation. The tradition of documentary realism in postwar Yugoslavia was initiated by the state-sponsored *Filmske novosti* (Film Newsreels), which enacted a national realism that explicated current events. The newsreels tended to run ten or so minutes and had a bright, upbeat nature. Before television became widely dispersed in the 1960s as a form of mass communication in Yugoslavia the Film Newsreels in the cinema were the only way for people to get moving-image reports on the state of their homeland. As such, these newsreels played a key role in forming the consciousness of the people.

In order to establish the wider cinematic context, I will briefly trace key examples of the visualizations of workers throughout the international history of documentary cinema. Sergei Eisenstein's film *Strike* (Стачка, 1925), though not a documentary proper, presents a revolutionary image of workers in the Soviet Union. The workers are often depicted as a surging mass of energy. One particular scene is of consequence here: the workers as they bathe together in a body of water. The homoerotic content of this scene has been commented upon by other critics. Of more interest for the purposes of this essay is the emphasis on the sensuous contours of the workers' naked bodies. We will come back to this fetishising of workers' bodies in the subsequent analysis of Žilnik's film. In his book *Blurred Boundaries*, Bill Nichols includes Eisenstein's film within the genealogy of documentary. Nichols feels that Eisenstein thoroughly rethinks the representation of workers:

> "It is only when they are not workers that some small taste of a better life becomes possible (illusory, if they are ultimately still workers)."[11]

Relating this to *Strike*, the scene where the workers frolic with each other while bathing presents them as something other than workers, if only for a fleeting moment. This transformative notion of play or idleness resurfaces in the aforementioned films by Žilnik, particularly in *The Unemployed*, where workers are never seen doing anything like working (though perhaps this stands to reason given the title of the film). This "alternative way of being' does not necessarily harbinger a better life in *The Unemployed*. Rather, it traps the workers in a purgatory of sorts, from which there is not a desirable escape on either end of the spectrum (deadening work, or a total lack of work).

In 1933 the film *Industrial Britain*, directed by Robert Flaherty and produced by John Grierson, presented a vision of industrial labor. The film opens with images of windmills as the voice-over intones that the old must make way for the new. In the context of this film this signifies a shift in the mode of production and of labor. In *Industrial Britain* national concerns are associated with work and workers. The coal industry is the first area explored in this film; we see miners going about their work in dark and dangerous conditions. Here we begin to observe a deglamorized vision of workers, and we gain proximity to their plight through a



The contours of bodies

series of close-ups on faces and bodies. The idea produced is that we must engage an intimate approach in order to understand workers. In one early image we see a coal miner strip down out of his shirt before he begins his tasks. This concern with bare bodies echoes Eisenstein's workers and points the way toward Žilnik's workers. The desire to move closer to workers begets an urge to inspect the contours of their bodies; this is particularly true with regard to manual laborers. This would also be the case for the visual style of socialist realism, with its focus on workers' bodies and appendages.

Karl Marx was very much concerned with bodies and their nature as visible evidence of the effects of labor (of course, with an eye toward the destabilizing nature of work and its relation to predatory capitalism). As he wrote in his "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,"

> "the more the worker by his labour *appropriates* the external world, sensuous nature, the more he deprives himself of *means of life*."[12]

So for Marx this external "sensuous nature' has an adverse effect on the very sensuous nature of the worker's body—of her very means of life. This cruel irony of the worker's body being somehow estranged from that which it engenders is extended in another of Marx's more well-known postulations:

> "the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker."[13]

This deformity manifests itself in both physical and social terms. If we relate this to Žilnik's film, again, he takes special care to reveal this physical deformity as evidence of the social deformity of exploited labor. For Marx this elemental deformity can also be viewed in economic terms, as the laws of political economy. Capitalism is inherently unequal, even vampiric, and it necessitates that one's success must come at the expense or expenditure of another. So capitalism's very structure deforms man. However, Žilnik also indicates that the socialist obsession with work and workers can be just as cruel and deformative toward human beings.

Michel Foucault writes of the Western modern age that

> "the human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it."[14]

The economic machinery of work invades the body for the purposes of subjugating it, while in the process almost destroying it. Modern work can be seen as a discipline (in the Foucauldian sense: new technological power) that domesticates and even punishes bodies. Here we can begin to see the links with regard to how socialist ideology was concerned with a certain power struggle, why it prioritized and celebrated the bodies of workers—with an intent to discipline and punish those that would not conform; to create docile bodies, just as capitalism requires. Foucault quotes the early modern French writer Nicolas Delamare:

> "Sleep is the image of death, the dormitory is the image of the sepulchre."[15]

Žilnik's film is set almost entirely in a worker's dormitory and, indeed, we see many of the workers attempting to sleep. A very strong link is made between the numbing, fatal sensations of work and the workers as the living dead who must navigate this graveyard. The decay of the human body in Žilnik's film then is something of a funeral procession or a requiem for the working class.

Marx (channeling Hegel) wrote "to be sensuous is to suffer' and that because man feels what he suffers he is a "passionate being."[16] The anthropologist Paul Stoller has argued for a "sensuous scholarship' to match a passionate content—a scholarship tuned to the subtle human materialities of life that are often elided in formal, objective affectations. Stoller feels that many scholars consider the body a text to be read and analyzed:

> "This analytical tack strips the body of its smells, tastes, textures and pains—its sensuousness."[17]

If we relate Žilnik's film work to that of an analyst more than the work of an artist, if only for the moment,[18] we will find that he practices a very sensuous method in his approach to shooting the film *The Unemployed*. Žilnik is interested in the textures and pains of the workers in an effort to elucidate their situation rather than to aestheticise it. In my book on the Yugoslav Black Wave I wrote that Žilnik uses the camera like a scalpel rather than a paintbrush in his efforts to achieve a social analysis.[19] We can certainly ascribe a social scientific approach to his work if we remember that he was trained as a lawyer rather than an artist.

Stoller defines sensuous scholarship as when

> "writers tack between the analytical and the sensible, in which embodied form as well as disembodied logic constitute scholarly argument."[20]

Citing the example of African Songhay griots, he says that for them

> "history is not a subject or text to be mastered but a force that consumes the bodies of those who speak it."[21]

Stoller deals with cinema in his writing and felt that images can be physiognomically transformative. His primary examples of this type of imagery are drawn from the work of Antonin Artaud as a theater artist and the cinema of Jean Rouch, both of whom he felt were "reacting to the power of the State to manipulate images and erase pain and suffering."[22] This brings to mind the iconography of socialist realism, which glorified workers and the "nobility" of their "work-hardened bodies" at the expense of the cruel realities of industrial and rural labor. When Stoller theorized a "cinema of cruelty" by way of Artaud's conception, he said that the goal is

> "not to recount per se, but to present an array of unsettling images that seek to transform the audience psychologically and politically."[23]



An array of unsettling images

Žilnik utilizes cruel images of workers to similar ends, as there is very little shining nobility in his vision of laborers, and rather than work-hardened bodies—broken-down, docile, and work-battered bodies.

In her influential treatise on political mimesis, the film theorist Jane M. Gaines maintains that

> "there has been little or no discussion of the sensationalized [sic] body in radical documentary films."[24]

Further on, she writes that this is

> "perhaps because one tends to think of sense and body in terms of sexuality, and the committed documentary has always been seriously asexual."[25]

We confront notions of sexuality in *The Unemployed*, as Žilnik's rendering of naked workers' bodies in close proximity—in addition to showering together and sometimes sleeping in the same bed—borders on the homoerotic, regardless of the fact that the constricted misery that the workers are forced to live in is a direct result of faulty socio-economic conditions rather than a lifestyle choice. When Gaines references an inventory of the sensual documentary that needs to begin with Eisenstein's *Strike* we will recall the homoerotic overtones of the scene with the workers bathing together. However, Gaines later claims that in relation to Eisenstein she is "not thinking of the sensual scenes of the male workers bathing' but rather "scenes of rioting, images of bodies clashing, of bodies moving as a mass."[26] Hans Magnus Enzensberger thought that the decisive political factor of electronic media was its "mobilizing power," which had been "crippled' by those wielding state control. He feels that propaganda freezes this power, but also thinks that "marches, columns, parades, immobilize people."[27] Indeed, the ideological line separating official and oppositional public demonstrations is thin. Though there is no rioting and clashing in Žilnik's film we do see images of bodies moving as a mass. Bodies clash in a playful manner on beds rather than in violent conflict with forces in the streets. Notions of the body in sensual documentaries evoke notions of solidarity, in both theoretical and physical (thus sexual) terms. Perhaps Žilnik is moving toward a sexualized committed non-fiction filmmaking.

As Enzensberger implored,

> "A "critical" inventory of the status quo is not enough."[28]

Let us then proceed to a close reading of Žilnik's film in a sensuous manner. The first interview in *The Unemployed* is conducted with a man who speaks about the injuries his job at the train station caused him as well as the resulting operation he had on his back. He lifts up his shirt to show a scar on his torso. His stomach is firm and work-hardened—if sucked in just a bit for the benefit of the camera. The scar runs from his underarm to his left pectoral muscle and certainly appears to be an injury from lifting or carrying heavy weight. This is the first instance in the film in which we see the burden of work played out on the body of the suffering worker. The second interview in the film features a man questioning the definition and viability of socialism—a socialism and ideology which has obviously not supported him as a worker. As he talks the camera pans down to frame his hands clutching a matchbox. Also visible is the relatively nice wristwatch that he wears with a leather band and shiny face; the comfortable woven sweater he is dressed in begins to produce the impression that perhaps he is a potential manager, or maybe an intellectual laborer.

After this interview Žilnik cuts to a title card with the fractured word "*ljudi*" ("people"), maybe better in this instance to say "humanity." The broken word split in half evokes the broken-down unemployed bodies at the heart of the film. Over this image we hear the sound of either an automatic weapon or some sort of automatic heavy drill—it is not clear which. This ambiguity, like that of the image of the matchbox and match hovering in the air in a sort of limbo, is full of ideological potential that is left unresolved. A few moments later we see a large group of men in a dormitory shower. Their naked bodies render them virtually indistinguishable from each other. The misty water rains down on them like a light summer storm as they rush to lather themselves with soap. Žilnik then cuts to a close-up of feet as a worker lies in a dormitory bed. His feet are dirty and bruised, heels coated with rough and dry skin. Žilnik then cuts to another close-up of a worker's neck as he flexes and tenses his throat muscles. The veins connecting

his neck to his collarbone strain and jut out against his skin, which folds up and wrinkles as it scoots closer to his chin. His stubby facial hair completes the image of a most unfamiliar bodily view. This brief montage continues as the camera pans to another close-up of a tensed and disembodied neck, this one a bit older and more wrinkled. What this quick pan has showed us is something of a summary of the accelerated aging process that results from intense physical labor. A third neck is displayed following another quick pan. By this point the body has become abstracted to an unintelligible mass of muscular contours and tactile skins.



During this brief montage we hear the voice-over of a worker explaining the problems he is having with his teeth and an inability to visit a dentist to fix them. After an image of a group of workers' naked backs, which recalls the first interview subject and his surgically-corrected back, we see an extreme close-up of a ruined set of teeth. The holes between these teeth create dark crevices in uneven rows. Their deformed structures scream out maltreatment through stains and other images of decay. Now we begin to understand the subversive nature of Žilnik's film and his unveiling of the cruel reality behind glorifying myths. Marx's nobility of work-hardened bodies is a false construct when seen in close-up. The iconography of socialist realism that exalts valiant and strong workers is attacked in this film with images of manipulable, instrumentalised, and subjugated workers—exploited workers. Over continued declarations of a lack of work and deplorable living conditions—which we are also able to see in the crowded dormitory—Žilnik pastes an upbeat communist march song that would not be out of place in a parade. This is another subversive pairing which functions as an implicit blasphemy toward optimistic socialist ideology, betraying Žilnik's critical aims. As we hear this song a worker reads out loud a personal advertisement in a newspaper about a woman seeking to date a man. While he narrates her exhaustive description of the various delicious meals she can prepare, Žilnik cuts to an image of a group of workers devouring the plain bread that is given to them for subsistence. This is yet another ironic juxtaposition in a film that is full of them for rhetorical effect.



The cruel reality behind glorifying myths

One of the final sequences of the film is of a worker walking across the naked bodies of his comrades as they lay in beds placed side by side. In this instance the workers are used as literal supports and as a living walkway. The path to communism is paved with the broken-down bodies of the working class. As the saying goes, the path to hell is paved with good intentions, which then opens the unresolved question about what the road to (a socialist) paradise is engraved with. *The Unemployed* is a film that does not pose straightforward questions about labor issues to then elicit routine answers about how to improve the situation of workers. This is perhaps where its unique resonance lies, as it is much more elliptical in its approach. Žilnik is not interested in teaching a distant and objective lesson but rather in moving us closer to the subjectivity of workers who have not often been given an acute reflection throughout the early history of documentary film. Žilnik does not treat his workers like a faceless mass, though he does focus on large groups of them. His project is to reconstruct the image of workers at a body-specific level, to resist the facile categorization that creates a binding ideology around workers rather than a liberated space with creative potential for growth and transcendence. Again, quoting Enzensberger:

> "The author has to work as the agent of the masses. He can lose himself in them only when they themselves become authors, the authors of history."[29]

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The era of Yugoslav New Film was connected to the international revitalization of film form and content in the 1960s. We can speak of this particularly in Europe

with regard to Poland, France, Czechoslovakia, Germany, and other countries. In Yugoslavia the openness of the new film era incubated an offshoot that would derisively be labeled the "Black Wave," which was characterised by polemical engagement through a combative social critique as well as dark and morose themes and conventions. Žilnik was one of those filmmakers at the center of the controversy surrounding the Black Wave as it was then flourishing in the mid-to-late 1960s, reaching something of a zenith in 1969 when he made his debut feature *Early Works*.

Early Works was banned for a brief spell and Žilnik had to rely on his legal education to defend the film and his right to freedom of expression in court — which he did successfully. In fact, *The Unemployed* was censored as well, the authorities finding particular fault with a section of the film focusing on unemployed women. Žilnik's response was to simply excise the offending section so that his film could be released. He keeps the reel of "unemployed women' safe in his home studio. One can imagine an integral version of the film easily being reconstructed, should he choose to. So Žilnik ultimately paid a heavy price for being labeled as part of the Black Wave — in fact, he became unemployable. He was kicked out of the communist league for subversive leanings and provoked to emigrate to West Germany to live and work, where he remained a border-crossing troublemaker.[30]



Walking the path to a "black' means of expression

Žilnik's path to a "black" means of expression was tread by way of his early short films like *The Unemployed*; *Little Pioneers* (Pioniri maleni mi smo vojska prava, svakog dana ničemo ko zelena trava, 1968), about children living on the streets; or the aptly-titled *Black Film* (Crni film, 1971), documenting his attempt to deal with the homeless problem in his city as well as embodying his explicit response to official accusations made against him. These powerful and insolent films were all indicative of not only the larger world of modern documentary filmmaking and the international appearance of new interventionist and observational non-fiction modes, but also an entire inclination toward revolutionary change in both art and society. Returning now to the question about the path to heaven. Religious dogma states that the route is by way of the souls of your fellow human beings. For Žilnik, in *The Unemployed*, the road to an improved collective humanism is mapped by the very materiality of the body as a sensual, suffering, and noble intermediary.

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Notes

1. Daniel Jakopovich. "Yugoslavia's Self-Management," *The Spokesman*, no. 117, 2010: 57-63. [return to text]

2. Ibid.

3. John R. Lampe. *Yugoslavia as history: Twice there was a country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 272.

4. Ibid., p. 279.

5. Ibid., p. 261.

6. Ibid., p. 283.

7. Ibid., p. 311.

8. Ibid.

9. Groys 1997, p. 78.

10. De Cuir 2013. See also the special issue of the Slovenian journal *Kino!* on Partisan film (2010) and the new anthology *Partisans in Yugoslavia: Literature, Film and Visual Culture* edited by Miranda Jakiša and Nikica Gilić (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015).

11. Bill Nichols. *Blurred boundaries: Questions of meaning in contemporary culture* (1994), p. 111.

12. Karl Marx. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844' in *The Marx-Engels reader, second edition* edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 72.

13. Ibid., p. 73.

14. Michel Foucault. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [orig. in 1975]), p. 138.

15. Ibid., p. 143.

16. Karl Marx. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844' in *The Marx-Engels reader, second edition* edited by Robert C. Tucker (New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 116.

17. Paul Stoller. *Sensuous scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. xiv.

18. We can recall Godard's famous statement that Jean Rouch's job description as an anthropologist is maybe also the best definition of a filmmaker.

19. Greg de Cuir, Jr. *Yugoslav black wave: Polemical cinema from 1963-72 in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia* (Belgrade: Film Center Serbia, 2011).

20. Paul Stoller. *Sensuous scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. xv.

21. Ibid., p. xvi.

22. Ibid., p. xvii.

23. Paul Stoller. "Artaud, Rouch, and the Cinema of Cruelty' in *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Fall 1992: 50-57.

24. Jane M. Gaines. "Political Mimesis' in *Collecting visible evidence* edited by Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 90.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Enzensberger 1970.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Some of the socio-critical films he began making in West Germany were censored, eventually turning him into *persona non grata* there. Likewise, within a few years he was forced to return to his home country.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Filmmaker Anand Patwardhan

Participation, poetry and song: Anand Patwardhan and New Latin American cinema

by Shweta Kishore

The writings of Indian independent filmmaker Anand Patwardhan (1984, 1997, 2012), as well as scholarly engagements with his work (Catherine Bernier 2013, Geeta Kapur 2008) acknowledge cinematic parallels between New Latin American Cinema and Patwardhan's early film practice and style. In this paper I explore the terms of this cultural exchange as it relates to Patwardhan's film practice and also to the particular ways in which political documentary in India has adopted, adapted, and even exceeded ideas and theory drawn from New Latin American Cinema. In particular, two key Manifestos of the New Latin American Cinema, *Towards a Third Cinema* and *For an Imperfect Cinema* are central to Patwardhan's cinema; these historically situated documents explicitly separate political cinema from dominant forms of commercial and artistic cinemas.

I begin my inquiry by outlining the historical postcolonial Indian context of state-dominated cultural production and of a period of political instability—against which Patwardhan's cinema practice originates. I then identify particular intersections between the Latin American Manifestos and Patwardhan's practice to arrive at a situated understanding of the relation between the Manifestos and their (re) interpretation in the context of Indian social documentary cinema.

Independent social documentary cinema in India has responded and aspired to intervene in the historical conditions of the day. Manju Pendakur (1995) finds in these films "voices of sanity, tolerance, and resistance amidst a cacophony of fundamentalism, fascism, and greed" (Yidff, web). Anand Patwardhan's, film *Waves of Revolution* (1975) about the 1974-1975 Bihar student uprisings is widely regarded as an initial example of this mode of cinematic production and a forerunner of the independent documentary movement in India.

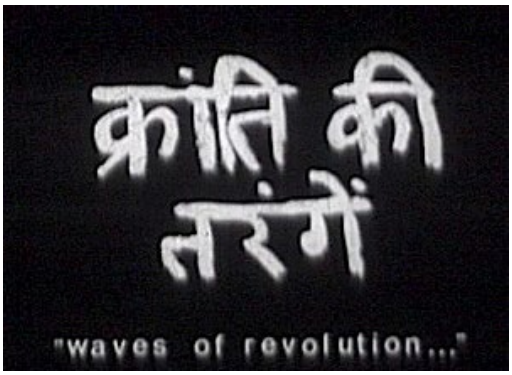


Patwardhan (left) recording location audio during the filming of Waves of Revolution.

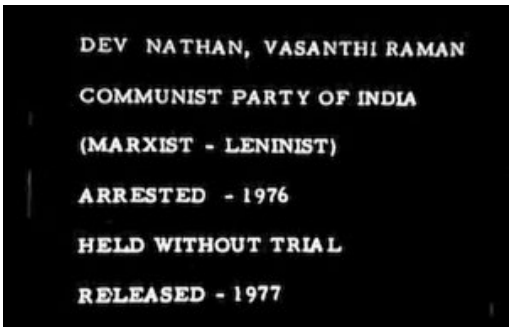
Indian social documentary filmmakers continue to cite the legacy of Patwardhan's practice and films as industrial and cultural models for their personal relation with the genre and its political possibilities. While many of the filmmakers have proceeded to develop complex individual expressions of documentary form, the ongoing reference to Patwardhan is significant, for it gestures towards the fundamental role played by the filmmaker in shaping the contours of an emerging political film consciousness.

In this paper I approach Patwardhan's work from the fact that, according to him, both his critical theorizations (1984, 2007, 2012) and his films' political, aesthetic and industrial foundations are inspired by radical New Latin American Cinema. Scholarship around Patwardhan's cinema (Geeta Kapur 2008, Catherine Bernier 2013, Gargi Sen 2012) confirms this resonance between Patwardhan and the Latin Americans since each view cinema as an instrument of social intervention. As well as investigating the intersections between the two practices, I wish to explore the transnational flow of ideas and practices in the area of social documentary cinema and the subsequent interpretation and application of internationally circulating ideas to national realities and contexts.

I base my method of inquiry upon Tom O'Regan's (2008) formulation of cultural exchange, a process of cultural dispersal that, according to O'Regan, facilitates the "lending and redisposition of cultural materials" from one cultural context to another (262). While this circulation—the giving, receiving and redisposition of cultural materials—occurs in a continuous process, the central debates in film studies turn, according to O'Regan, upon how we "identify its nature"—in other words, how do we identify "the range of cultural exchange practices and processes that are selected for investigation and discussion" (263). The nature of cultural exchange as a process thus does not simply entail a duplication or replication of cultural material in another context but involves processes of adaptation, indigenization, resistance, and appropriation. Here I am interested in the transactions between the ideals of practice, aesthetics and cultural relations proposed by Third Cinema practitioners and the situated set of Indian historical conditions to which Patwardhan's cinema responds. Volatile political conditions of popular dissent and state repression, institutionalized regimes of documentary film production, and indigenous cultural expressions of resistance allow us to



Title card: *Waves of Revolution*



Prisoners of Conscience: An information screen preceding the interview of Dev Nathan, political prisoner.



Prisoners of Conscience: A graphic focusing attention on the issue of torture of political prisoners.

understand and evaluate the processes of cultural exchange between New Latin American Cinema and its adaptation to the Indian context.

In this paper I make two arguments that concern the nature of the social documentary film in India as it was influenced by transactions between Latin American cinema and Patwardhan's adaptation of its ideas. The first concerns the dimension of documentary film practice and includes methods of conceptualizing the filmmaker's mode of operation in the historical world, including relations between the self, the other, and social processes. Departing from the predominantly Griersonian modes of institutionalized documentary methods that predominated in India during the 1970s-1980s, Third Cinema offered a method for conceptualizing a direct relation between the intellectual and documentary filmmaker, art and social participation.

My second argument concerns aesthetics and transactions between the political modes of cinematic expression proposed by Third Cinema and ways they might be adopted within a post-colonial cultural and political context. I argue that Patwardhan expands the concept of political cinema by seeing it as a form related to the broader cultures of popular protest. In this way, Patwardhan's understanding of Third Cinema not only takes into account what Dennis Hanlon (2014) calls its formal Brechtian aesthetic politics, but Patwardhan connects documentary cinema with broader cultures of resistance. Unlike the representational conventions of observational or ethnographic cinema, incorporating popular cultural expression constitutes an integral rhetorical and aesthetic element of Patwardhan's film narratives.

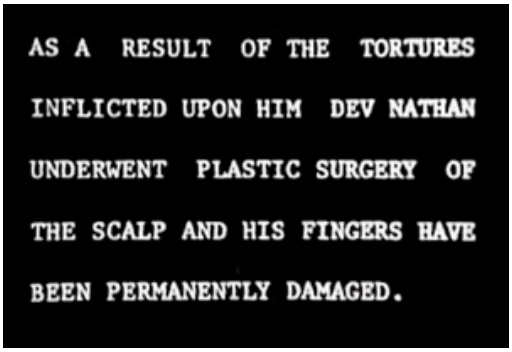
Latin American cinema

In Patwardhan's writing about his filmmaking philosophy, he refers specifically to two radical manifestos of New Latin American Cinema. The first "Towards a Third Cinema," is an essay written by Fernando E. Solanas following the making of *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), a film, according to film scholar Robert Stam, (1990) made "in the interstices of the system and against the system... independent in production, militant in politics, and experimental in language" [253]. A second essay that Patwardhan cites is Julio García Espinosa's "For an Imperfect Cinema." According to Patwardhan both documents offer "theoretical positions" that "justify and demarcate the emergence" of a Guerrilla Cinema in the Third World (446). In terms of film models, Patwardhan (2003) has also consistently cited Patricio Guzman's *The Battle of Chile* (1975), a film that presented to him the possibility of adopting cinema as a viable means of protest, one, he writes, that "remains etched in my mind" (Patwardhan.com, web). Patwardhan's early encounters with documentary cinema occurred during the early 1970s, while studying sociology at Brandeis University in the United States, a campus radicalized by anti-Vietnam War sentiment.

While a detailed history and account of New Latin American Cinema is beyond the scope of this paper, I will briefly outline its key ideas as discussed by theorists who have engaged with it in depth in order to indicate broad parallels between the theory of this cinema and Patwardhan's beliefs and methods. The consolidation of radical national histories of cinema into a New Latin American Cinema Movement is attributed to the 1967 Viña del Mar Festival and the first Encuentro de Cineastas Latinoamericanos (meeting of Latin American filmmakers). According to Ana Lopez, the movement traces its legacy to the national cinemas of Latin American nations that had turned against the commercial products of Hollywood during the 1960s. While the term, she writes, represents an attempt to "impose unity" on a "number of diverse cinematic practices," the 1960s demonstrates an expansion of nation-based cinemas into a broader Latin American consciousness



Prisoners of Conscience: Political opponents of the state behind bars.



Prisoners of Conscience: Details of the torture inflicted upon the interviewee, a political prisoner during India's state of Emergency.

(311). In 1967 *Cine Cubano* published a report on the 1967 meeting of Latin American filmmakers that proclaimed the birth of the New Latin American Cinema.

> "Despite the diversity of its creators, its nationalities, and its modes of expression, there exists in Latin America a cinema strongly opposed to the denaturalizing marks of Yankee imperialism and its Latin American branches. This is a cinema that is strongly tied to the aspirations and needs of its people, a cinema that has offered a number of proofs of its very serious professional and artistic commitments." (cited in Lopez, 322)

The two key proclamations from and about this cinema that Patwardhan cites are the subject of analysis by Michael Chanan (1997) who notes a "certain homology" between the two (377). The first is the notion of Imperfect Cinema. This, according to García Espinosa, is unlike the "technically and artistically masterful" cinema because Imperfect Cinema does not seduce its audiences into consumption. According to Chanan this theorization matches Solanas and Getino's critique of "First Cinema," a cinema of spectacle, large-scale production and passive consumption. The second homology Chanan notes relates to publics, where both manifestos focus upon the audience of radical cinema, people historically considered backward or uneducated. Looking at that audience in a positive light, García Espinosa (1979) identifies those who "struggle" as the audience for Imperfect Cinema. These "lucid" people" he writes, "are the ones who think and feel and exist in a world which they can change" (web). Solanas and Getino identify a similar audience sector that revolutionary cinema could actively motivate towards political participation. The social sectors considered "backward," they write, "are perfectly capable of grasping the precise meaning" of cinematic language as long as it relates to "a determinate idea." Revolutionary cinema they continue, "attempts to make an intervention which impels a response" (56).

Following the experience of making his first underground film, *Waves of Revolution* (1975), in a synthesis of the radical ideas of Third Cinema and Imperfect Cinema, Patwardhan (1984) outlines his concept of Guerilla Cinema, which has as its primary purpose social reorganization. Differentiating Guerilla Cinema from the neutral approach of "objective" or "sociological" films, he contends that this cinema recognizes that the world is "divided into classes" and seeks to "expose the injustice of the system" (447). Patwardhan (1984) was to relate the Guerilla aesthetics of his early films to the conditions of their production; the imperfect quality is a trace of the "trials and difficulties" that the film and the movement faced in a hostile environment of state led violence and arrests (456). Utilitarian aesthetics, contends Patwardhan (1998), were necessary only "to tell the story" whilst his aesthetics nonetheless consisted of a range of modernist, avant-garde and experimental uses of sound, music, montage, archive and still images (Raza and Kumar, web).

Patwardhan's writing about film aesthetics depicts clear homologies with the beliefs of Third Cinema, particularly its relation between aesthetics and ideas. Solanas and Getino dismiss the notion of pure beauty as a revolutionary ideal for art, dismissing it as "idealistic aspiration," and Patwardhan too conceives of aesthetics as the formal expression of ideas in the service of action, instead of an



The opening logo of Films Division of India featured in its documentary films.

end in itself (49). In addition, he expands on this aesthetic and enriches it in both cultural and cinematic ways. However, before I talk more about Patwardhan's unique and influential cinematic style, I proceed to trace out some of India's contemporary history that provides both the subject matter and the political context for his films, the conditions of their making, and the forms of political address towards its audiences.

Patwardhan and cultural-history 1970-1980

The decade of the 1970s during which Patwardhan began his filmmaking career witnessed what is widely considered one of the most blatant and autocratic exercises of power by a democratically elected state leader. On June 25, 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suspended the civil rights and constitutional liberties of all citizens guaranteed by the constitution of India. During this period of Constitutional Emergency, democracy was brought to a halt, conferring upon Indira Gandhi the power to rule by decree. Political theorist Sudipta Kaviraj finds that the real reason for the suspension of civil rights was a "most serious challenge" to the leadership of Indira Gandhi and her Congress Party posed by the Bihar based movement against state corruption, also known as the JP Movement (195).[1] [open endnotes in new window] The actions and political foundations of the JP movement form the subject of Patwardhan's first Indian documentary film *Waves of Revolution* while the repressive conduct of the state during the Emergency forms the subject of his next film, *The Prisoners of Conscience*. Filmed during the height of protests during October 1974-March 1975, *Waves of Revolution* is shot using a regular 8mm and Super 8 mm and later a borrowed Bell and Howell 16mm camera with donated film stock. At the beginning of the film Patwardhan outlines the social objective of the film:

> "to capture Bihar at the moment of its awakening after 24 years of famines, floods and silence" (WOR, film).

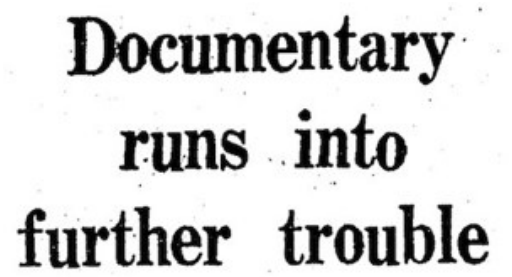
The media landscape partially was responsible for the silence against which the



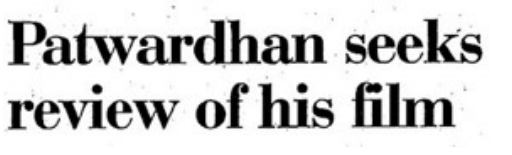
Indira Gandhi in Films Division's documentary, "Our Indira": Building the narrative of great leadership.



Film Division's "New Era": The Emergency portrayed as a period of discipline and civil order.



News headline about Patwardhan's "A Time to Rise", censored for its potential to cause strained relations between India and Canada *(Times of India* May 19, 1982).



A report About Patwardhan seeking a review of the CBFC decision with regard to his film "War

film militated. During the 1970s, India had only restricted spaces of screen production, which traditionally subordinated image making to either state institutions or the industry's market demands. I will discuss the ways in which at this juncture state control over documentary film production governed any historical representation of the period of constitutional emergency. A vital aspect of domestic policy, the production of documentary cinema was the responsibility of the Films Division of India, an institution under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, directly under the command of the high-ranking civil servant, the Chief Producer. Annual film production output and content were jointly determined by the central government in consultation with state governments, departments and ministries. These consultations took into account the priorities of the central Five Year Plans, events of national importance, and political exigencies. In her discussion of these films and their post-colonial nationalist context, Srirupa Roy terms these films the "handmaid of the national state" where the state is presented as the "key agent" in the process of "national becoming" (38).

Aesthetically and socially, the documentaries produced by the Films Division are a continuing chapter in the Griersonian tradition of public service documentary. Camille Deprez (2013) traces the foundations of the Films Division (hereafter, FD) as an institution to a Griersonian belief in the positive social function of art. Under the leadership of independent India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, FD performed as an institution of symbolic nation building, which Deprez says "appropriated Grierson's notion of integration and consensus," rather than individualism (155). The translation of this symbolic belief into practice can be seen in the mechanical ways that FD interpreted its creative remit. As an example from this period, Section III of the 1974-1975 Annual Report of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting outlines the main aims of FD: "to use the medium of film to disseminate information," "to focus attention on the country's life," and "to bring about enlightened participation in the affairs of the nation and objective appreciation of facts, events and personalities" (35).

During 1974-1975, while the student movements in Gujarat and Bihar gathered force and veteran socialist and freedom fighter JP Narayan joined the widespread national protests, representational media came under strict central control. Writing shortly after the end of the Emergency, Rudolph and Rudolph (1978) conclude that during the Emergency

> "pluralist representation was anathema to state sovereignty and the common good, Mrs. Gandhi attacked pluralist representation head on by characterizing it as license…" (385).

The way the FD films depicted the causes and effects of the Emergency provides a clear way to distinguish Patwardhan's critical cultural position in relation to state controlled regimes of documentary representation. Instead of maintaining the self-proclaimed "objective appreciation of facts," the FD films respond frontally to the agitating sections of the nation. Under the "Major Campaigns" listed in the 1974-1975 I & B report, the government harnessed Films Division to promote "National Integration" through cinematic means. This was achieved, continues the report, through films that,

> "…stressed the importance of maintaining social harmony and peace, and depicted the suffering caused to the poorest sections of society… through the eruption of communal tension or in the course of extra parliamentary agitations." (2)

During this period, filmic output from the Films Division contributed visually to

and Peace" (*Times of India* June 19, 2002)

Censors seek more cuts in Patwardhan's film

A report about the CBFC demand for deletion of sequences in "War and Peace" (*TOI* August 28, 2002)



Poster for "Father Son and Holy War"

constructing the narrative of the Emergency as a period of strong leadership and rapid social development. These films include *Naya Daur/New Era* (1975, S.N.S. Sastry), *We Have Promises to Keep* (1975, S.N.S. Sastry) *For You and Me* (1976, J.S. Bandekar) *Help Them, Help You* (1976, B.G. Devare) *True Stories* (1976. S.P. Ganguly) *The New Wave* (1976, Chandrashekhar Nair). Along with nation-wide programs introduced by Indira Gandhi during this period, these cinematic narratives present the Emergency as a period of discipline, order and accountability in the process of building a stronger nation.

Patwardhan's *Waves of Revolution* and *Prisoners of Conscience* (1978) that cover the same historical period and terrain, on the other hand, offer a critique of the Emergency that led to the incarceration without trial of 100,000 people (182). Patwardhan filmed and edited these works at great personal risk of arrest and torture. Dennis Hanlon (2012) offers an extensive description of the production process of each film and views them as examples of "urgent cinema," one technically imperfect but politically exigent. Both films bring into the public domain the voices of those officially denounced as traitors on account of their participation in the protest movement. At the same time, each film offers a broader political analysis of the events and offers ways of thinking about the events in the political context of the Gandhian histories of non-violent resistance and non-cooperation, and the democratic provisions enshrined in the national Constitution.

For the Central Board of Film Certification (hereafter CBFC), exhibition of both the films threatened political volatility, prompting a decision to restrict their exhibition, subject to a series of cuts. Patwardhan screened the films clandestinely for a period of two years until 1977 when following the end of the Emergency and a change of government, the films were granted an "Unrestricted" certificate for public exhibition. The actions of the Censor Board, in its role of cultural regulator, and Patwardhan's subsequent response to this form of repression brings to light the determinedly public dimension of his cinema.

Censorship has haunted Patwardhan, forcing him to confront the dictates of bureaucratic power in a constitutional democracy for eight of his films. Seeking to minimize the socially disruptive potential of Patwardhan's films, the Censor Board has routinely demanded the removal of scenes that it believes, "have an adverse effect on the minds of the viewers," an observation it made with reference to *Father, Son and Holy War* (Patwardhan, 1995), a film about patriarchy and religious fundamentalism. The acts of censorship, while demonstrating an authoritarian exercise of power, also reveal Patwardhan's view of political cinema not only as a subjective experience but as an agent of collective consciousness. His decision to seek censor clearance to enable the public exhibition of his films on national television—in an environment where private circulation beyond the purview of censorship is the dominant mode of documentary exhibition—is a gesture of wider cultural significance. In this goal of social reorganization, Patwardhan's struggle for public exhibition depicts his efforts to exceed the confines of spaces assigned for cultural circulation such as film clubs and film festivals. He wants to address, in Shankar Menon's (1985) eloquent terms, "all in authority, high or low, the elected, the selected, the clerk, the entrepreneur, the singer and dancer" (Patwardhan.com, web).

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The filmmaker as social participant



Publicity poster of "A Narmada Diary"

In this section, I discuss the ways in which Patwardhan's practice demonstrates key elements of the propositions of Third Cinema with regard to the historical relation between the filmmaker and the social world but one that adapts the propositions to the postcolonial social and cultural context. Adaptation implies changes or modification in an idea or process in response to a new environment. For example, Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner (2012) ascribe to adaptation a "metabolic quality" where material is broken up to be re-aggregated as part of "a new living organism." (6). The New Latin American filmmakers had questioned the separation between intellectual activity and broader social participation. In Patwardhan's practice these questions came to be answered through a method that collapsed the distance between image making and material modes of resistance.

One of documentary's formal traditions, Direct Cinema, espouses detached objectivity when confronted with social actors and events, in favor of an "authentic" recording. Such a "claim on objective actuality," according to Brian Winston, proposes a determinedly detached production relationship between the filmmaker and film participants of Direct Cinema (6). In contrast, in "For an Imperfect Cinema," García Espinosa asks a number of rhetorical questions about the socially constructed separation between intellectuals, artistic expression and political commitment. He asks:

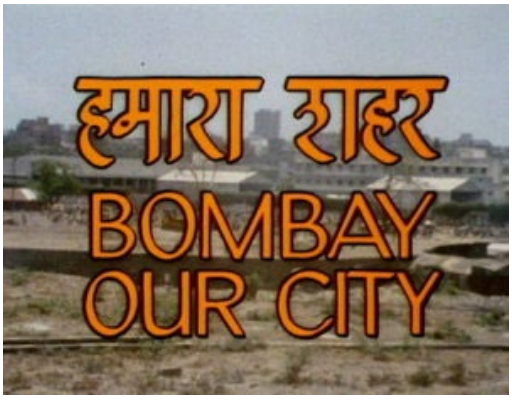
> "Why protect oneself and seek recognition as a (revolutionary, it must be understood) political and scientific worker, yet not be prepared to run the same risks."

For many Latin American filmmakers, political commitment has long extended to the social world. Reflecting upon Third Cinema, Paul Willemen (1989), interprets this practice of politically committed art as an

> "end to the division between art and life and therefore between professional, full time intellectuals such as film-makers or critics and the people" (5).

In this light, Mariano Mestman (2011) outlines the radical participation histories of Solanas and Getino, both of whom belonged to the Argentine Communist Party and the Peronist Troskyist groups respectively and were to later identify with Juan Domingo Perón, and the Movimiento Nacional Justicialista, the name of the Leftist Peronist party.[2] [open endnotes in new window]

In order to differentiate his practice and purpose of filmmaking from that of the observational filmmaker or the academically-oriented sociological filmmaker, including those who make anthropological or ethnographic documentation, we can look at Patwardhan's work to understand his personal relation to the social conditions and actors that lies at the heart of his films. In epistemological frameworks where art and life were considered separate, documentary film was imagined as a mode of information, objective observationalism or scientific documentation. But in Patwardhan's documentary approach, each film is grounded in personal social participation and tangible objectives. In his hands,



Title card *Bombay, Our City*



Residents sit beside destroyed hutments in *Bombay, Our City.*



After the bulldozers have left, from *Bombay, Our City.*

the practice of documentary cinema thus becomes what Solanas and Getino term the "field" in which the intellectual can "deploy his forces" for the goal of social emancipation (47). The collapse of the discursive separation between the filmmaker and the social-historical world embraced by the New Latin American filmmakers forms a core dimension in Patwardhan's practice. In his cinema, documentary filmmaking is incompatible with a condition of neutrality, objectivity or detachment.

Abandoning the neutral position of observer, analyst or commentator associated with the roles of ethnographer, Direct Cinema practitioner, or journalist, Patwardhan stands with the workers, the slum dwellers and the marginalized subjects of each film. Beginning with his first *Business As usual* (1972), a film to raise funds for the displaced refugees of the 1971 war in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) while studying at Brandeis University to *Bombay, Our City* (1985) and *A Narmada Diary* (1995), each film offers an insight into this relational practice of film and the historical world. *Bombay, Our City* emerges from Patwardhan's membership in the Mumbai-based Nivara Hak Suraksha Samiti (Committee for the Protection of the Right to Shelter), an umbrella group of 20 organizations opposed to the slum demolition activities of the Mumbai Municipal Council. United under the demand to provide alternative housing for demolished dwellings, the committee also responded to crisis situations when contacted by slum residents upon the arrival of demolition crews. Along with the political beliefs in the fair distribution of urban space, the film is constructed from Patwardhan's personal knowledge of and experience within this resistance movement.

In an interview with Sean Cubitt (1986), Patwardhan describes the way in which active participation creates a cinematic aesthetic not of a perfectly controlled or intended visual order but of the partial, the opportune, and the chanced-upon. An objective of making a film does not impose its aesthetic will upon the unfolding events. He says,

> "At the same time, the roles between film-making and activism are constantly changing. Has the organization suffered? I definitely would have got better footage—zooms, hidden mics, dramatic shots of bulldozers clearing people out of their shanties at dawn—but instead we warned the people that the demolitions might happen and tried to organise resistance.... The most dramatic footage would have been the panic as the demolitions started, but it is too hard to sit by and watch, because there were people there we had come to know. We are organising demos and also filming them." (63)

Testifying to this tension between intervention and image making, in *Bombay, Our City* the camera rarely captures the beginning of the moment of crisis; the arrival of bulldozers, frenzy of violence, and actual demolition are nearly absent from the visual narrative. The camera films only the aftermath, scattered remains of the belongings, dwellings themselves lying as fragments of cloth and scaffolding —besides which the residents recount the instant of impact.

One of the most cited sequences from the film offers a point of entry into the dialectical political aesthetics of the film, poised between artistic considerations and political commitment. By including this sequence Patwardhan works to obstruct what Solanas and Getino decry, a limited systemic response of "democratic broadmindedness" (49). As the camera films the thousands living on the pavements of South Mumbai under a pouring monsoon rain, a woman holding a baby confronts the filmmaker:

> "Where can we go? Do you have a solution? You just want to earn a



Women residing on Mumbai's pavement confront the filmmaker in *Bombay, Our City.*



The woman accuses the filmmaker of exploiting the poor for image-making.



Migrant workers building the high rises of Bombay in *Bombay, Our City.*

> name taking photographs, what else can you do? Don't just take photographs of the poor." (*Bombay, Our City,* film).

The filmmaker does not respond and includes this heated speech that effectively points out the disjuncture between the lived material dimensions and any symbolic representation of the unfolding crisis. In artistic terms, the sequence is a potent example of formal self-reflexivity, a key area of interest in documentary studies, and at the same time this sequence places center-stage the political issues of class relations at the heart of the film. It potently brings alive on the screen the hierarchies of class—the social distance between the filmmaker, middle class viewer and marginalized film subject. It seems to pose questions about the social adequacy of filmmaking and film viewing itself. But Patwardhan's disinterest in establishing a metacritical aesthetic or his own ethical credibility is evident when he says,

> "I toyed with ending with that scene…But finally the main contradiction is not between the filmmaker and the filmed, but between them and the landowners" (64).

He shares this disavowal of the critics' opinion with García Espinosa who also questions the powers of "critics (mediators)" in justifying artistic value (3). To show both this encounter as well as narrative juxtapositions of upper class hostility towards slums expands the issue of urban spatial contestation from presenting ameliorative solutions around rehabilitation to analyzing primary conflicts of class and socio-economic relations.

The functional dimension of film as public communication that New Latin American filmmakers demonstrate through their direct support of political groups and leaders is another point of intersection with Patwardhan's practice. Solanas and Getino explicitly exhort cooperation between filmmakers, organizations and the public to address the insufficiency of "individual rebellion" (52). In Patwardhan's case this communication activity extends to building public opinion through the film as well as through taking personal action in the public world. The filmmaker sees himself as a participant in a broader radical coalition. For instance the rushes from *Bombay, Our City* were used as evidence by the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties to successfully obtain a temporary reprieve against slum demolitions. But the continued participation of the filmmaker in the movement after the completion of the film offers further evidence of the merging of art and history. In February 1986, nearly two years after the release of the film, Patwardhan continued to participate in protests against slum evictions. He courted arrest with 150 slum residents against the demolition of dwellings in Sanjay Gandhi Nagar slum, and later during May 1986, he joined a hunger strike with three slum residents to demand alternate land allocation. This form of visible action, while gathering direct support for the cause, also attracts the attention of a broader group of socially connected agents. The role of the educated middle classes, civil liberties activists, lawyers, and journalists forms an important dimension in the larger struggle; they can raise the visibility and strength of the struggle. Filmmaking and participation in these conditions, according to Patwardhan, plays a role in a targeted communication project. He states (1986),

> "Well, if this kind of work was not carried on, public opinion, which is already violently against slum dwellers, would be even worse than it is today. The fact that demolitions are protested, keeps public opinion from being totally reactionary and also keeps authorities on their toes" (Interview, *Manushi*).

India saw a growing culture of non-institutional social documentary during the 1980s; for this group of media makers, Patwardhan's form of involved practice had potent implications. The merging of the political and the artistic, of thought and action, allowed a way out of a detached or institutionally constrained mode of artistic production that had dominated Indian documentary cinema since independence. The collapse of the distance between the private and the public where the filmmaker's private politics now forms the basis of public artistic expression has formed the ethic of an involved form of social documentary filmmaking amongst upcoming Indian filmmakers who arrived at their art from a wide spectrum of political movements and struggles. It has permitted the middle class intellectual filmmaker a model for moving beyond observationalism or informational reportage and to an extent has addressed an older criticism of social oratory, attached to the Griersonian social documentary filmmaker.

Documentary narrative and cultures of protest

For García Espinosa, aesthetic imperfection is the point of departure from the fetishistic pursuit of impartial artistic purity. In concluding his argument about Imperfect Cinema, he places "folk art" as the idealized form of democratic artistic expression. The folk as a form of "popular memory" according to Third Cinema theorist Teshome Gabriel (1989) offers an alternative history remembered not from the center but from the peripheries of power. Popular memory, Gabriel writes, no longer orders time as a "reference point" but as a "theme of struggle" (54). In its expression, popular memory often adopts traditional cultural genres in its analysis of and response to social conflict and struggles. Local forms of music, poetry and theater in their response to socio-historic conditions produce rich performative and literary expressions of resistance. In this section, I will examine the ways in which Patwardhan brings together popular oral expressions of cultural protest with the issues at the centre of his films. By incorporating popular arts, each film integrates ideas and theory with existing cultural histories, at once drawing values from them and affirming the connection between his cinema and people's struggles. At the same time, unlike the state documentary film, Patwardhan's cinema refuses to celebrate people's cultural expressions under bourgeois notions of an idyllic decontextualized "folk," instead focusing on the performers and their ways of encoding political meaning and narratives of social history.



Protests against racial discrimination in Santiago Alvarez's "Now."

Using music in social documentary cinema also recurs in the Griersonian public service documentary. Grierson (1966) viewed music as an aesthetic device in the creative treatment of the material of the "real," an element that enhances the sensory dimension of the visual. Rather abstractly he observed that music provides an opportunity for something "individual and different and imaginatively so" (180). In her account of early experiments in documentary sound, Carloyn Birdsall argues that Grierson attributed to music the potential for "providing atmosphere or dramatic tension" with a sharp focus upon narrative and dramatic structures (29). In contrast, whereas Indian public service documentary film has continued to incorporate music precisely to provide atmosphere, to create an aural experience or as a symbolic representation of "other" cultures and rituals, Patwardhan uses music, I contend, to historicize and make audible the symbolic expression of resistance amongst the groups and

communities shown in his films. In each film, the music heard is specific to the struggle being waged, and its use in the film offers a way of thinking about the unique synthesis of aural cultural traditions with political consciousness.



Police brutality against African Americans in "Now."

Waves of Revolution is a reflexive film where Patwardhan directly addresses the viewer through voice and image to simultaneously chronicle the JP movement and build favorable public opinion.It features two songs from the JP movement. Both are similar rousing calls to youth to rise up and take responsibility for leading the revolution. In his discussion of a related symbolic form of expression in India, political slogans, Lalan Tiwari (1987) argues that slogans were necessary to establish the non-violent credentials of the JP movement. Unlike violent movements, a non-violent movement, he continues, seeks to secure its objectives "through pressure on the authorities" such as strikes and marches. It requires the "mobilization of more and more people" and slogans serve an important function in "ventilating" mass grievances (176). Music shares the slogan's political impulse; it uses language to creatively capture a sentiment or message but also uses affective sonic registers to evoke political meanings.



A still image from "Now" showing victims of police violence.

Waves of Revolution's first song, "O youth the revolution is at your door," shares aesthetic and political resonance with Santiago Alvarez's legendary call to political action with the film *Now* (1965). In particular it can be examined alongside Alvarez's choice of song, sung by Lena Horne, arranged to the music of the Hebrew folksong "Hava Nagila" and visually constructed from found footage. Considered a successful example of revolutionary Cuban cinema, *Now*, writes Julianne Burton (1978), "elevated the film collage to a high level of political and artistic quality" (*ejumpcut*, web). Working within political and financial constraints, both filmmakers construct highly original and experimental visual montages that combine the musical form of protest with historical imagery to situate the lyrics in the context of a contemporary social struggle (images 21 and 22). Alvarez relates the lyrics of *Now* to the racial tension and violence in the United States, and Patwardhan relates the song in his film to the volatile history of the student resistance movement in a democratic nation-state. At the same time both films function as poetic exposition where music imparts the political framework against which to interpret the still and moving images.

> "Who will come forth today against corruption and face the repression of the ruling class... Have mountain cliffs ever stopped the onslaught of storms and can guns succeed in stopping the onward march of youth... O youth, the revolution has come to your door" (Patwardhan's film)



"August" a handwritten graphic from a montage in *Waves of Revolution.*

Recorded on a cassette recorder and sung by the student members of the revolution, these lyrics are from the first song in *Waves of Revolution*. The scratchy texture of the choral ensemble is mixed together with the stirring sounds of collective cheers and clapping from a public rally. As Patwardhan dubs each verse, a public speech of Jai Prakash Narayan fades in, explaining the origins and political thesis of the movement, and Narayan utters the eponymous title of the film. The multilayered rhythmic sonic-scape of synch and non-synch sounds, of strategic rhythmic juxtapositions of speech, music, spoken words and verse, creates an internal logic that is largely autonomous of the visual. The visual track functions as exposition to outline the chronological monthly progression of the movement during the previous year, visualized through newspaper reports, still images and observational footage of street level demonstrations, often superimposed and edited together using quick dissolves.

Departing from conventions of empirical indexicality between documentary image and sound, Patwardhan's images are linked conceptually to the central ideas behind the lyrics. As the song builds in its political intensity with lyrics



A news image of police firing at anti government protestors from a montage in *Waves of Revolution.*



News images of police brutality from a montage in *Waves of Revolution*.



Bring such a day to pass O Brothers, Vilas Ghogre's songs function as exposition in *Bombay, Our City*.

offering more concrete visual metaphors of public action, the images too intensify in emotion; and as in Alvarez's *Now*, images of street demonstrations, are intercut with police repression of peaceful protest. Patwardhan's arresting still image of three policemen poised to assault an unarmed protestor parallels almost symmetrically Alvarez's image of horse-mounted police with raised batons. In Patwardhan's final sequences as the song mentions the figures of past revolutionaries—"It is martyrs like these that have protected the honor of the land"—images show the protestors arriving at the gates of the Parliament House in New Delhi (*Waves of Revolution*). This song that historicizes the movement allows Patwardhan aesthetically to expand storytelling beyond conversations and interviews to sensory modes that encapsulate deeper political theorization of the ideology behind the social movement. Although the song embodies the political spirit of the movement, Patwardhan does not disclose the identity of the singers, perhaps a testament to the period's volatility.

Among Patwardhan's early films, the music of *Bombay, Our City* stands as one the clearest amalgamations of cinema, music and political thought. It features Leftist Dalit poet-singer Vilas Ghogre of the Mumbai-based troupe, Avhaan Natya Manch, a radical cultural group that performed political theatre and music in Mumbai's textile mill areas during the 1980s. Accompanied by musicians on a traditional *dholki* drum and a tamborine in *Bombay, Our City*, Ghogre sings about the "tragic story of the labour classes" in the midst of working class areas and slums (Translation, author).[3] To the rhythm of the drum in the first of several narrative sequences, Ghogre describes the farming classes' history of exploitation. "The landowner earned while we sweated," he sings. "Usury drove us from the village to the city." With each narrative appearance, the singers recount the historic oppression of sections of the working classes—construction workers, textile mill workers, laws enacted against slum dwellers. Finally towards the end of the film, the singers exhort the workers to unite,

> "Forget caste and creed... with the strength of the union demolish the parliament of lies... let us give a revolutionary call to end our troubles...bring such a day to pass O brothers"

Ending each verse with a crescendo, they pose the question "Why is this so?" to which comes the resounding chorus, "Because it's a feudal rule brother, it's a false rule brother, a feudal rule brother, a false rule brother." Placed in sequence following the interviews of slum dwellers who testify to the illegal actions of the demolition squads, the song's verses directly connect these experiences to the exploitative feudal patterns of land distribution that lead to current deprivations.

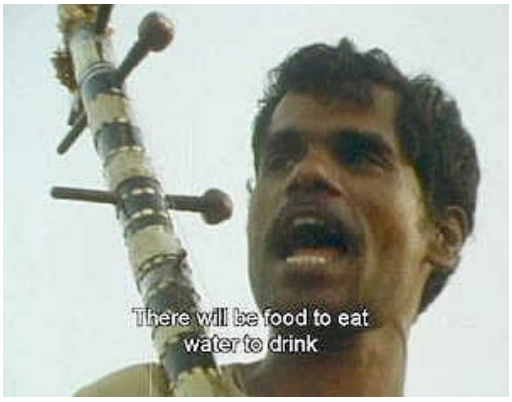
The song's style and performance provide a vital glimpse into Patwardhan's approach of directly correlating protest cultures into the documentary as an innovative aesthetic element. Unlike the use of song as a cultural artefact that is selectively presented as an example of its artistic excellence, Patwardhan uses song as a vital element of the narrative. In visualizing and editing each performance sequence, Patwardhan emphasizes its interactive nature to evoke an affective narrative about working class solidarity. In its musical arrangement, the song invites participation from its working class listeners. The structure of the song incorporates rhetorical questions and in an uncomplicated chorus, each line ends with the word "brother," establishing a symbolic emotive connection with the listeners. The lines are arranged to a simple rhythmic beat and repeated to encourage listeners to join in. Through its aural qualities of lyricism and poetic metaphors, the song builds an affective bridge with audiences. As a storytelling element, in the absence of narration, the song functions as poetic exposition to historicize the conditions of the urban poor within a broader political framework of Marxist economic theory.



Epic images of Vilas Ghogre performing in the slums areas of Mumbai, in *Bombay, Our City*.



Ghogre performs in the foreground separated from Mumbai's posh high-rises by the Arabian Sea.



Ghogre singing of a workers' future in *Bombay, Our City*.

Unlike the unidentified singers of *Waves of Revolution*, Ghogre and his accompanists are given considerable narrative space and their song forms the meta-voice of the narrative. Since the members of this troupe belong to Mumbai's working classes and the further oppressed Dalit (formerly Untouchable) groups, the poetry and music of Ghogre and his ensemble comprise what García Espinosa describes as "popular art," an art where producers and consumers do not occupy reified roles; instead "the creators are, at the same time, the spectators and vice versa" (6). The singers enact the surrogate voice of the filmmaker and also are the interlocutors of the historical memory of the social actors. In this light, visually Patwardhan accords them a heroic status, often zooming in to Ghogre's face as he sings, and at other times, filming the group of singers in iconic low angle shots, framed against the sky. At one point, in a remarkable piece of political visualization, the camera pans away from the singers to reveal the relational spatial panorama in which they are located. Composed almost geometrically, in the background stand Mumbai's gleaming new high rises; in the foreground, we see a row of brown, dusty shanties, separated symbolically and physically in the middle ground, by a still blue Arabian Sea. As a transitional device, the songs allow the filmmaker visually to move between the immediate location of the slum through the wider space of the city and the nation, in such a way that the narrative can make intellectual linkages between the local events and the nation-space.

Conclusion

Other transactions between Latin American Cinema and Indian documentary cinema continued to occur in dispersed and scattered sites over the decades of the 1970s, 1980s and the 1990s. These include the private VHS circulation of *The Battle of Chile*, the popular visit of leading Cinema Novo filmmaker Nelson Pereira Dos Santos and the public screening of *Tent of Miracles* at the 1978 Madras "Filmotsav" Film festival, and some years later, the screening of Cuban political cinema at the 1987 New Delhi "Filmotsav." The films, the directors, and the political theory of New Latin American Cinema were significant cultural materials for Indian filmmakers during these decades. In focusing specifically upon Anand Patwardhan's works and practice, I hope to achieve a two-fold objective:

- to map and locate empirically the indices of what are largely discursive references to Latin American Cinema when discussing Patwardhan's films, and
- to examine the alternative forms of theorization that through Patwardhan's work came to shape the perspective of emerging documentary filmmakers during the gathering documentary movement of the 1980s.

Indian filmmakers' material and conceptual exchange with New Latin American Cinema forms an important historical and cultural site from where to view the ways in which documentary cinema, instead of continuing upon its inherited trajectory of Griersonian, state-sponsored, public service documentary, has come to be adopted more as a mode of political expression. In Indian filmmaking to come, congruence between filmmaking and social activism would characterize the works of the Mediastorm Collective, Amudhan RP, KP Sasi, Meghnad and Bijju Toppo and many others. Reworking documentary aesthetics to turn it away from purely cinematic concerns to a space of political visualization that combines local cultural expressions with documentary aesthetics has also opened up new possibilities of political collaborations between communities, filmmakers, and other artists.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. Jai Prakash Narayan or J.P. writes Norman Palmer (1975) “is a veteran Gandhian apostle of non- violence who enjoys perhaps the highest reputation of any prominent Indian for absolute integrity and selflessness. He re-emerged into the political arena in early1974 as a champion of student-initiated protest movements in Bihar and challenged Mrs. Gandhi to test the popularity of her party and her "corrupt" government through the electoral process”(96). [return to text]

2. According to Mestman, through the Cine Liberación, Solanas and Getino were to film the testimony of Perón for screening in Argentina as part of the political work supporting his return from exile in Madrid.

3. Vilas Ghoghre committed suicide in 1997 following a series of violent attacks on Dalits in his residential colony in Mumbai. Anand Patwardhan’s film *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2012) is a political examination of caste relations that led to this extreme step. Constructed without narration the film instead includes songs performed by a contemporary Dalit political group, *Kabir Kala Manch*. The production and exhibition of the film is further evidence of the filmmaker’s personal form of filmmaking (see Bernier, 2013). [return to text]

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There goes the neighborhood: Tabasco Video's multi-platform media strategies against gentrification
Et Le Panier dans tout ça?

by Michelle Stewart

Marseille is France's second most populous city, known for its diversity as well as its history of urban mismanagement and corruption made famous in fiction as old as *The French Connection* (William Friedkin, 1971) and as contemporary as the Netflix suspense series, *Marseille* (2016).[1][open notes in new page] Of course, Marseille's pop cultural notoriety obscures a complex social make-up. As one of France's most important port cities, Marseille has seen strong patterns of immigration, current and historic. Le Panier, the oldest neighborhood in Marseille, offers a window onto the diversity and character of the city as whole. In WWII, the Nazis and their Vichy collaborators declared Le Panier a hotbed of criminal activity, crimes understood to be both racial and political and squarely in support of the Resistance. In January 1943, the city's Vichy regime evacuated Le Panier, deported almost 800 of its Jewish inhabitants, and bombed the section of Le Panier closest to the Old Port. Despite these efforts, the portion of Le Panier that was spared now attracts tourists with the quaint, labyrinthine streets that once sheltered resistance fighters. To this day, the neighborhood remains a diverse, working class neighborhood with a strong left-leaning and union-activist population, and, unfortunately, an unemployment rate that is almost three times the national average.

In 1995, Le Panier and neighboring Rue de la République were targeted for a colossal urban renewal project, Euroméditerranée, meant to make the neighborhood more livable, more sustainable, and more amenable to commercial and touristic development. As outlined in its mission statement, the goal of Euroméditerranée has been to "acceler[ate] the process of making Marseille an attractive and influential city between Europe and the Mediterranean."[2] Billed originally as the largest urban renewal project in Europe, Euroméditerranée has meant a massive infusion of private and public funds for Marseille.[3] Yet it also represents a model of development aimed at raising tourist revenue and creating urban dwellers with more taxable income than Le Panier's long-term residents (Rescan).[4] Amid official assurances that Euroméditerranée would benefit locals, residents of the Le Panier felt left without recourse or a voice.[5]

Tabasco Video entered this field in 1999, a field marked by the increasing privatization of both public airwaves and urban spaces. Situated in Le Panier, Tabasco is a community video group committed to creating alternative channels

of communication and creative expression. This article examines the participative practices of Tabasco video as they move from video workshops and creative community distribution to web-based practices. How well are efforts to create meaningful social interaction supported by new interactive technologies and art forms? Via an analysis of *Et Le Panier dans tout ça* (*And Le Panier in all that?,* 2015), the group's first foray into web documentary, we will consider how effectively the group has translated and transposed its carefully crafted ethos of "participative television" to the web.

Since its inception, Tabasco's brand of participative television has brought filmmaking and instantaneous exhibition to the streets of Le Panier. The foundational goal of participative television is to bring community members into dialogue—intergenerationally and interculturally. In so doing, Tabasco displays its roots in the neighborhood video movement in France (The Federation of regional and neighborhood video groups, *La Féderation des vidéos des pays et des quartiers* or VDPQ for short). The Federation of VDPQ itself emerged in 1989 from a felt need for local networks for the exchange of information and experience. Federation Coordinator, Thierry Michel recounts that the public television network, France 3, wouldn't take videos from local groups.[6] In response, local producers, who had trouble finding distributors banded together and founded the federation, which mobilized social "animators" (local activists and social workers), television, and video makers in the production of community media. Thus, the movement parallels the U.S. community cable-access television movement but with funding coming from local public sectors, both municipal and regional sources.[7] Tabasco, too, hoped to intervene at the local level, but always with an emphasis on process and "product." Their mode of participative television is fundamentally activist and local, "inscribed in the territory," as they put it. Yet rather than opposing politics to aesthetics, their method mobilizes the social force of local representation ("voice") by fostering attractive, collaboratively-produced media and effectively distributing it locally.

In this sense, their model of community video creates forms of "living documentary" (Gaudenzi, "Living Documentaries") that conscript old and new media into local transformation and the production of new social relations. Sandra Gaudenzi, in her original work defining interactive, "living documentary" resists fetishizing the medium as the motor of social change:

> "Living Documentaries are not the simple evolution of linear documentaries through digital technology. Digitality is fundamental, but not enough. Their liveness and adaptivity is what permits them to change; it gives them a transformational power" ("Living Documentaries" 16-17).

Thus, Tabasco's sense of interactivity pushes past the function of community media centers as sites for technical training alone. Tabasco views media interactivity and participation "'as a condition of being' rather than just 'delivery mechanism'" as the group aims to affect change by enacting meaningful forms of participation from pre-production to exhibition (Gaudenzi, "The Living Documentary" 29). Tabasco's participative television practice, particularly in its move to the web, imagines that community media can be artistic, politically relevant, and socially effective – on the ground and online. In their own words, their aim is "to weave ties by means of video as an expressive tool."



"The image as a tool of expression." The graphic situates Tabasco Video firmly in the ongoing debate about the gentrification of Marseille's Old Port.

To be meaningful, their conception of participation requires the production of media art that effects social transformation by inviting constant participation in the conception, creation, and distribution of the work. Each moment in the creative process holds out the potential for building community, creating social ties, and informing.

Seen in this light, participative television already contains a model of "interaction" in its philosophy, particularly if both interactivity and participation are always understood as social, creative, and technical. Yet, as many activist artists stress, real interactivity is always promise and a challenge. Interactive documentary scholar, Kate Nash draws attention to the fact that what we mean by interactivity is multivalent:

> "interactivity as a feature of technology; interactivity as a communicative dynamic; and interactivity as a kind of participant experience" (Nash 53).

In the specific context of Le Panier, for Tabasco, this has always meant merging these three senses of interactivity by creating media that help community members intervene in the processes of development and gentrification overtaking the neighborhood. For Tabasco, meaningfully participative television keeps the life cycle of media in mind, from process to product, from the social work of producing media to the social work of enjoying, consuming, and distributing it. Interactive media seems to hold out the promise of intensifying the relational dimensions of community media, offering, perhaps, a richer "afterlife" to the community media process and media product. In this sense, a notion of relational media echoes Latour's actor-network-theory and enriches the model of collaboration that we understand to be at the heart of community media.

As used by scholars of interactive media, relationality signals modes of interaction between media works (circulating DVD's, webdocs), processes (making media together), institutions (community media associations, distribution networks), and people (producers, trainees, and audiences). The quality and longevity of the relations knitted together by collaborative, local production matter deeply to community video groups. To keep that ethos alive, the technical interactivity

offered by webdocs must constitute something more than a limited set of commands for how to interact with a website. Nash notes that in interactive works, often users are "compelled" by the design of the site to relate to the information in prescribed ways: where to click, how to scroll, which personal information to enter (50-60).[80] To enact more meaningfully interactive and participative forms, then, means seeking media processes and aesthetic forms that foster open-ended and *ongoing* communication across online and social contexts.

A review of Tabasco's historical engagement in Le Panier will illuminate Tabasco's relational practice. Before the turn to web interactivity, the group's method of participative television consisted of three central modes of interaction with residents of Le Panier, *100 Paroles* (*100 Words,* video interviews and debates on the streets of Le Panier), video production workshops, and *C'est pas joli, joli* (*Not a Pretty Picture*, 2008-2010), a locally-produced soap opera.



"Proverb Stroll," where residents were asked to recite their favorite proverb and explain its significance. The tags read: "Sidewalk Interview, words of a resident."

100 Paroles was a multi-topic project for which residents conducted video interviews with other residents about issues of local concern: employment, housing, health, immigration, gentrification, current events (from the local to the national), in addition to "man on the street" reportage (*micro-trottoir*/spontaneous sidewalk-microphone interviews), or more formal documentaries. Neighbors were convened in the street, at local businesses and often engaged in pleasant on-camera debate (solo or in groups). Élodie Sylvain, director and then development officer for Tabasco, described the essential character of *100 Paroles:*

> "[It is]totally open. Interviewees can speak about whatever they want. They can reminisce about dead friends, contemporary politics, anything, right wing, leftwing, personal stuff, and the weather. We do not direct people. The point is to get them to express themselves, nothing more."[9]

In all these endeavors, Tabasco worked from its deep roots in the community, via social service organizations, women's centers, cultural groups, schools, and prisons to make sure that the largest cross-section of neighborhood residents has the opportunity to discover production.

Tabasco Video members are proud to have trained many local residents—of varying ages and education levels—encouraging them to go out into the street and interview other residents and, in the process, giving residents who might never have spoken the context to do so.



100 Paroles: Residents of Le Panier debate a local development project.

Tabasco also took their project, *100 Paroles*, to the corner bar, a strategy that found people where they were comfortable socializing and debating politics, and one which, at the same time, actually reanimated neighborhood cultural life. Their *modus operandi* rests on the principal that community expression and debate, whatever the topic, work against forces of gentrification by strengthening ties and local awareness.

Video production workshops

Tabasco carefully designs its video workshops to ensure that *participants* choose the topics and guide the forms of expression. The workshops have produced straightforward documentaries, news style interviewing and reportage. On occasion, participants have imitated familiar televisual genres, like cooking shows, "Tabasco Invites Itself into Your Kitchen," charting what locals are eating and how they make their food (a favorite topic in French Culture), as well as other popular forms, including rap and music videos, as well as mock promotional videos for local events (including a lively musical promotional video for the Sardine Festival, a celebration of Mediterranean cuisine and industry).



« **100 Paroles** » veut être un outil d'expression et de médiation du quartier à l'attention de ses habitants, des élus, des institutionnels et des décideurs privés potentiellement intéressés par les questions humaines et urbaines posées dans ce territoire.

Local teens create their own rap video: 365 jours par an *(365 Days a Year)*: The web caption reads: "*100 Paroles* wants to be a tool of expression and mediation in the neighborhood, addressing itself to the residents, elected officials, institutions, and private decision-makers potentially interested by the human, urban questions posed in this neighborhood." [Click on title to see video]



Local teens convince a grandmother to make her own rap video about her experience of Le Panier. [Click to see video]



Tabasco produces a musical promotional video for the local sardine festival (La Grande Sardinade). [Click to see video]

Exhibition and distribution

In addition to open-air projection and community screenings, Tabasco has been very inventive about forms of exhibition to maximize audience reach and to continue the conversations in all corners of the neighborhood. Older community media groups often emphasized the process of learning and making media together over the quality of the final work. Rapidly improving video quality has aided Tabasco in enhancing the creative success of the final work. Productions are edited in workshop and then literally pushed back out on the street via the "Télé-Poussette," (or Tele-Stroller) a baby carriage outfitted with a monitor.



The "Télé-Poussette" or Tele-Stroller, pictured on the left.

The *télé-poussette* represents an elegantly simple solution to the age-old problem of community media: the videos produced seldom have much of an after-life and there are few venues for distribution. Tabasco's *télé-poussette* re-embeds the videos in the communities that produced them, providing occasions for instant debate and appreciation and a particularly mobile form of distribution.

Collective viewing, as well, holds a central place in the group's method. Tabasco maintains a lively website, http://www.tabascovideo.com/, that serves as both forum and archive for the community productions. Tabasco also organizes *télé-plateaux* (television sets), which typically feature live debates engaging both the opinions and newly-formed production expertise of workshop participants. Sylvain recounts the pride of three Le Panier residents, older Algerian women, Zara, Kadijda, and Fatna, who had never touched video equipment before. They were approached by Tabasco at a neighborhood social center (Centre Social Baussenque) and began one of Tabasco's training workshops. As Sylvain recounts, the process of filming drew the women into places they had previously felt were closed to them, for example, a bakery that the women had assumed was "just for tourists." The interview process gave the women and the shop owner a chance to get to know each other over pastry.

In addition to facilitating this kind of fundamental social interaction, the *télé-plateaux* provide the occasion for participants to demonstrate their technical expertise. At a June 2009 debate, by then veterans of the production workshops, Zara, Kadijda, and Fatna, volunteered on set (as interviewees and technical staff). Describing the social and personal power of technical training, a Tabasco intern on set that day noted,

> "There's a certain pride for these women to be here.... It's also social to appear on a TV set, to be on camera. People look at you differently. Fatna was afraid to jump in, at first. I had to stay closer to her. But in the end, she did it and she did it on her own. It's a powerful form of emancipation" (Michel 5).

Along with technical competence, the quality of the aesthetic works instill pride in their producers each time they are performed and rebroadcast. This is especially the case for some of Tabasco's younger trainees, who have written and performed their own music. Tabasco's websites, live events, and partnerships have created venues for the performance or re-broadcasting of rap songs created via workshops, re-inscribing collective creation in community life via local festivals and street fairs. While remaining local in scope, all of these initiatives have the

effect of valorizing the works created, building confidence in their producers, and, at the same time, creating new occasions for conversation and socializing.

Fictional forms

In many of its workshops, the Tabasco team has emphasized reportage, documentary, dialogue and debate. Nonetheless, the group readily follows its workshop participants in the styles and content that speak most readily to them, from the music videos, and rap mentioned above, to political parody and fiction. For its largest and most ambitious project, Tabasco orchestrated the production of a neighborhood soap opera, *C'est pas joli joli* (*Not a Pretty Picture*), which brought together a cast of 40, including fishermen, taxi drivers, politicians, merchants, school children, and workers to write, direct, and act in a three-part soap opera. Tabasco conceived *C'est pas joli, joli* in response to *Plus belle la vie*, a torrid, nationally-broadcast soap opera that uses Marseille as mere backdrop. In contrast, *C'est pas joli joli* constituted a playful, locally-produced rejoinder that not only reflected the ethnic and economic realities of Le Panier and Marseille, but also served as a stinging critique of the destructive politics of gentrification that have plagued the city for over a decade.



Part of the cast and crew of *C'est pas joli joli* (*Not a Pretty Picture*, 2008-2010) pictured in Le Panier neighborhood.

For Tabasco, community engaged docu-fiction offers a valuable political aesthetic. Database Documentary artist, Sharon Daniel holds that fictional forms, particularly the interactive fiction of database and online documentaries, are imaginative and collective means of "staging reality" and, in the process, "enabling political subjectivation" (Daniel 217). Tabasco's model conceives of video training and production as facilitating social and political subjectivation in this manner. Put simply, all aspects of media production are treated as thoroughly social processes. In brainstorming and creating together, workshop participants draw from and recognize their shared experiences and identify ways in which they can intervene in shaping their worlds, much in the vein of Pablo Freire's *Theater of the Oppressed*. By writing, acting, and directing fiction together, by "re-imagining and reconstructing the 'fictions of the real,'" they "stage" the democratic forms in which they would like to participate.[10] For artists seeking rich notions of relational and interactive documentary, the challenge for web doc, then, is to transpose this political aesthetic to online forms.

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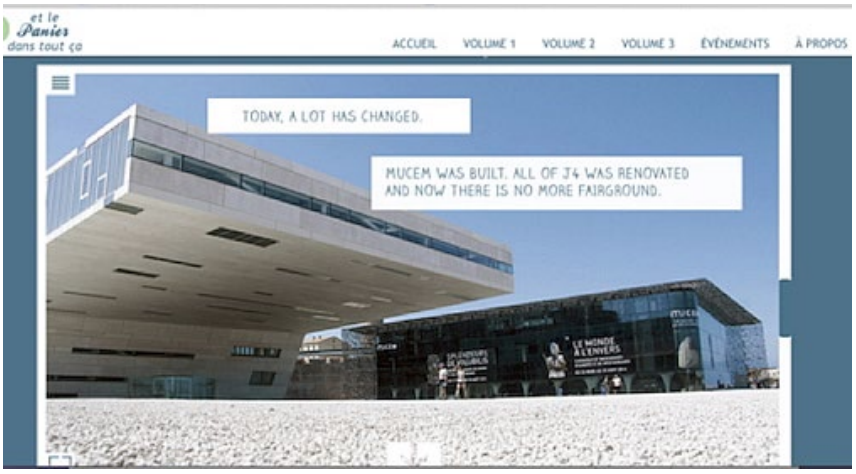
Move to the web

The decision of several of the Tabasco team to experiment with interactive, web-based documentary flows from their interpretation of participation. In launching their first interactive web documentary, *Et le Panier dans tout ça*, Tabasco sought an online format that might enhance the kinds of involvement they have always aimed to generate. Nicolas Dupont and Rémi Laurichesse led Tabasco's first foray into interactive web doc by reaching out to the junior high school, located in Le Panier and next door to the major development projects on J4—a quay on the old port that had been a major point of arrival and departure for migration for centuries.



Et Le Panier dans tout ça? Tabasco Video's first web documentary. The on-screen text reads: "In Marseille, the oldest neighborhood in Europe is in transformation. Discover 3 views of Le Panier and the changes that its inhabitants are living." [Click on title to see video]

Tabasco specifically wanted to engage school-aged children, in this case junior high schoolers, to reflect on changes in the neighborhood. Tabasco had already been very involved in supporting Le Panier residents in resisting various relocations that had occurred around several, decades-long development projects that came to fruition in 2013, the year Marseille was deemed a European "Cultural Capital."[11] [open notes in new page] 2013 also saw the completion of the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations (MUCEM) and its neighbor, Villa Méditerranée. Both buildings landed on a part of the old port (Vieux Port) that had been a favored site, where locals would stroll, play soccer, or fish and where the circus and fair would set up when in town.



Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations (MUCEM) and its neighbor, Villa Méditerranée presented in *Et Le Panier dans tout ça?*

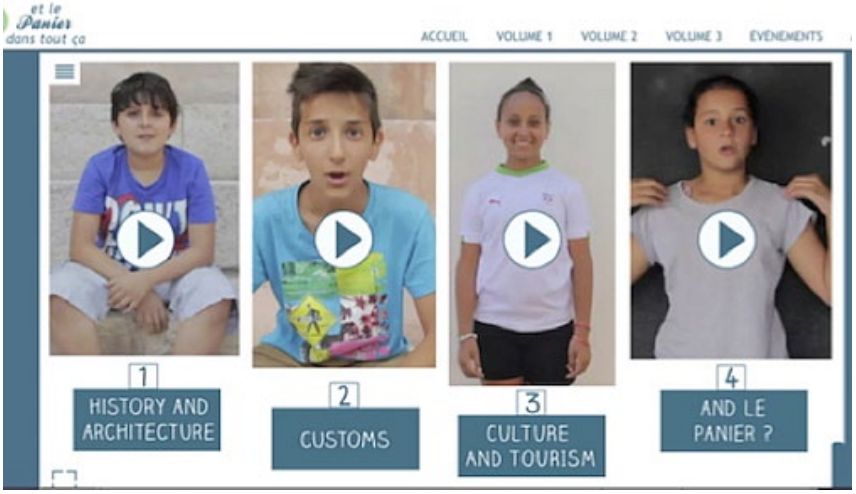
Dupont and Laurichesse took these development projects as the subject for Volume 1 of *Et Le Panier dans tout ça,* conducting a four-month long workshop with junior high schoolers. To mount the project, Tabasco received the support of regional and city governments, the Villa Méditerranée, MUCEM, and some crowd-funding. The partnerships with Villa Med and MUCEM gave the students and team access to the architects and program directors of MUCEM and Villa Med, as well as government officials and historians.

Undertaking a web doc proved to be more time-consuming than Tabasco's typical video workshop model. According to co-director, Nicolas Dupont, "We had to decide certain aspects of the architecture of the web doc in advance, which imposed a bit more pre-determined structure on the students" than would typically have been the case.[12] Having been committed to letting the creative demands of their workshop participants determine content and form, this felt like a cumbersome compromise to Dupont and he hopes to create "a simpler structure" to mount their next web-based documentary. Tabasco chose to work with an "out-of-the-box" storytelling platform, RacontR, because Dupont and Laurichesse did not feel "ready to undertake coding a web doc themselves." Some of the choices that they made at the outset regarding design "turned out to be more complicated in the web creation phase than they had expected" (e.g., the narration, or flow, of the story is controlled in a somewhat cumbersome fashion by the scroll bar).[13]

Despite the difficulty for the team of getting the work online, the structure is simple, but attractive—inviting the internaut to enter the students' stories and informing visitors that a full exploration of the site will take approximately 40 minutes. Once inside the narrative branches, the tone of the piece is dictated by the students, with their voices and photographic or video representations drawing the user through the informative threads. The storytelling follows four junior high schoolers, each pursuing a specific line of inquiry, which is animated by both student research and student-conducted interviews.



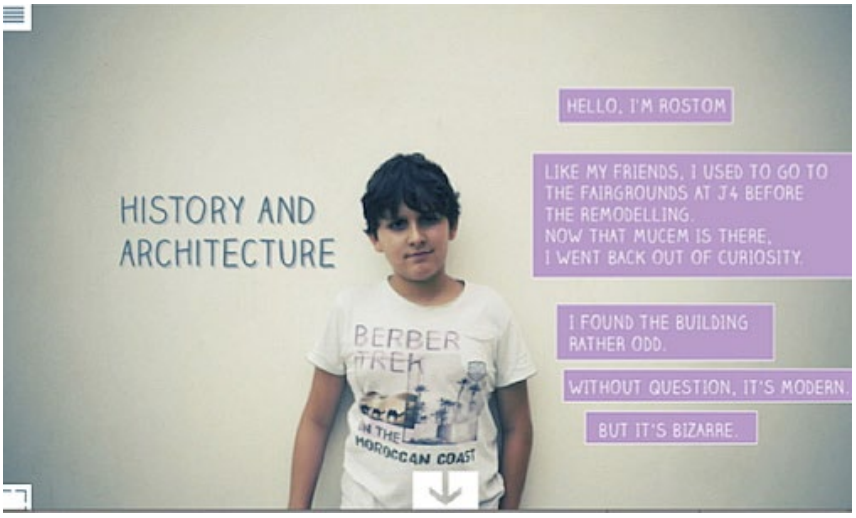
The front page of Volume 1 of *Et Le Panier dans tout ça*.



The four narrators and their subject matter.

The user interface is not intensively interactive as it employs what Adrian Miles (2015) might call a "branching tree" format. The interactor can follow specific pre-set branches, but the project is a semi-linear, web-based documentary (one doesn't have to follow any particular structure, but the scrolling arrows tend to lead you in one direction once you've chosen a line of inquiry).

In this sense, *Le Panier dans tout ça* is an "interactive artifact" – a linear documentary in the terminology of Gaudenzi ("Strategies of Participation" 130). It records and preserves the social interactivity of the production process, though it is closed to further authorship and evolution online. For example, if an online visitor chooses Rostom's image, she will follow Rostom's exploration of MUCEM, likely from start to finish. While the program doesn't prevent the visitor from moving backwards or revisiting vignettes, the flow and logic of the information follows a linear sequence.



One of the student narrators gives his take on the architecture of MUCEM after interviewing the museum's program directors and architects.

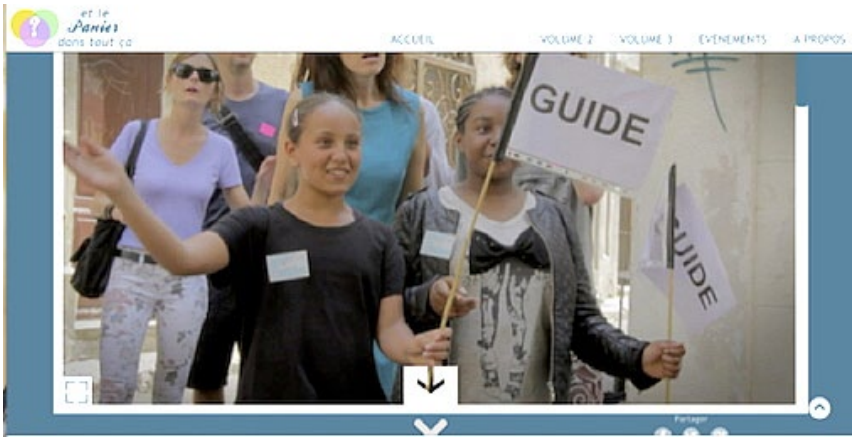
The participation and production training furnished by Tabasco's method remain visible and audible, with the questions, interests, and frank style of the adolescents shaping the content throughout the web documentary. Yet it is clear that the prefabricated platform, RacontR, restricted the aesthetic content somewhat and limited the possibility of student participation in the initial aesthetic choices and in the final online design.[14]

Web documentary, interactivity—participation

Most initial discussion of interactive web doc has focused on setting the genre(s), and establishing a workable set of descriptive terms that help to characterize the texture of interaction afforded by different aesthetic choices of the online format. For community video organizations, however, it is crucial to examine the extent to which the online aesthetic choices resonate with a group's historical practices and desired forms of social interaction.

In *Et Le Panier dans tout ça*, formally and content-wise, the most interactive dimensions of the project occurred in the pre-production, production, and exhibition phases of Tabasco's work, with less emphasis on involving workshop participants in the post-production phase. Indeed, for an online documentary, post-production requires good collaboration and coordination between the directors, the video animators, and the web designers on the project. This process left less room for post-production workshops with the students. Still, Dupont and Laurichesse argue that their aesthetic goal remained to "construct a narrative and to represent the voices of the students while being enjoyable for the internaut."

In some ways, the documentary practice of "representing voices" might seem like a step back from the forms of social interaction developed in Tabasco's participative television workshops. In terms of the concrete elements of participation, the students conceived, directed, and executed the interviews and historical vignettes. They also wrote, directed, and performed in several small fictions meant to dramatize the texture of their experiences. The flow of the web documentary follows their discovery process—their experience of the interview and creation process, and of the museums, which most of the students had never visited before the workshops.



Students script and perform in a mock tourist video to parody the changes brought by recent development projects.

I asked Dupont and Laurichesse how the students responded to the production work, as junior high school is a developmentally-intense period. They found that the students were often a "bit embarrassed and shy about beginning activities" and in interacting with adults. It was only "at the very end of the project, when the students were applauded by a full audience at the first public presentation of the work at Villa Med—that the students finally took real pride in the work."[15] For the directors, working with adolescents was at times "exhausting," but they valued the experience of drawing the students out of their own social awkwardness and into the larger world, coaching them to take charge of new forms of expression and inquiry.

As Julia Scott-Stevenson reminds us, the interactive or "cross-platform" work is true to the activist spirit of the interactive mode of documentary in diffusing "textual authority" between the directors and the students, as well as those interviewed by the students during the shooting of the film. Further, "collaborative authorship" is essential to establishing the "new documentary ecology," described by Elizabeth Coffman (111), in which "subjects are increasingly aware of their abilities to drive the narrative and opportunities to tell their own stories" (Coffman 111).

The student's authority comes across most directly and comically in the interview with one of Villa Med's architects, Ivan Dipol, in the "History and Architecture" section of the web doc. Rostom takes the architect by surprise when he asks why the building looks like a "giant whistle," a burning question for him and his classmates. Dipol has just laid out a poetic and serious explanation of the shape of the building as a structure that encircles and harbors a fragment of the Mediterranean, represented by the reflecting pool in front of the Villa. The architects wanted the sea to be *present* in the visitor's experience. Rostom's question interrupts Dipol's rehearsed response. He laughs and admits that the form of the building is "rather particular" and that, in fact, his young daughter thinks the building looks like the number "7" toppled on its side.

Choices regarding voice, textual authority, aesthetics, production process, and design all evince a particular ethos of participation. Yet, transposing participatory community media practices and goals to the web remains a challenge. Platforms can, of course, enable or hinder those objectives. As Kate Nash cautions,

> "The tendency to view interactivity as a characteristic that transforms the traditional relationships between documentary makers, subjects and their audiences is understandable and yet, as numerous new media scholars remind us, there is no necessary connection between interactivity and audience empowerment" (Nash 51).

In addition to critically assessing the audience impact of technical and aesthetic choices, directors must consider the kinds of storytelling interactive web documentaries (and different platforms) facilitate. Who will own it, where will the stories "go" (and circulate), how will they live on the web, how will they be used?

Et Le Panier is most successful in the ways in which Tabasco has already been successful, in creating "living documentaries," in making visible the social "web," the nexus of interactions between social forces, in leading novices in the co-initiation and co-production of content:

> "Besides co-authoring and co-producing there is another way to include the participant in the production of interactive documentary: co-initiating content. This happens when the collaboration is placed in the preproduction phase of both the video material and the interactive artifact. In this case, the participant is not a user of a launched interactive artifact but a potential subject of a project in its shaping." (Gaudenzi, "Strategies of Participation" 138).

While the prefabricated platform (RacontR) limited richer opportunities for evolving online authorship of the piece, the students initiated their own inquiry into larger social processes that had affected their lives. In turn, they learned how to make their perspectives known and how they might be circulated on the web. Viewed in this light, the production workshops for the webdoc can be seen as a useful initial foray into imagining how the participative television model might be carried into meaningful online interaction. In leading students to map the social transformations that affect their lives, Tabasco is close to enacting something akin to the "multi-dimensional" interactivity described by Kate Nash,

> "a multidimensional phenomenon in which the actions of users, documentary makers, subjects and technical systems together constitute a dynamic ecosystem" (Nash 51).

For the adolescent participants in the preproduction and production parts of the project, the modes of interaction engendered by the project were indeed multidimensional. The project led students to develop their own political voices, to map social processes, and to stage reality in the fictional vignettes. Yet from the standpoint of the online experience, the "branching tree" representation might not be interactive enough (socially/aesthetically) to engage a new online audience. The online experience of *Le Panier dans tout ça* might best be characterized in Gaudenzi's terms as a "categorical webdoc" delivered in the "hitch-hiking" or "hypertext" mode ("The Living Documentary" 48-49). The strength of "the 'categorical webdoc" and a feature that was chosen and valued by the Tabasco team, is that it

> "has a structure that does not push a chronological narrative, but rather proposes a collection of simultaneous entry points or equivalent micronarratives" (Gaudenzi, "The Living Documentary" 31).

Once online, however, these narrative entry points are fixed and perhaps enact a form of interactivity too circumscribed to provoke the same kind of social activation that Tabasco's regular workshop methods accomplish.[16] In the extreme, Gaudenzi suggests that the "hitchhiking or hypertext mode" creates an ""environment [that] is not unpredictable anymore, it is just explorable" (Gaudenzi, "The Living Documentary" 50).

For some critics, exploration in itself can constitute a worthwhile interactive experience. In their "Interactive Documentary Manifesto," Andre Almeida and Heitor Alvelos argue that good "interactive documentary should always explore

unique approaches to the subject that cinema can't achieve -the so-called "being there" feeling," for e.g. (Almeida and Alvelos 126). Most suitable and effective, in their view, would be works in which the filmmaker would serve as more of a "trail designer" rather than a "bus driver" (Almeida and Alvelos 127-128).

Et Le Panier dans tout ça does encourage the internaut to explore the perspective of the workshop participants and the tourists and Marseillais that the students interviewed. The documentary also gives online visitors the chance to see the urban areas affected by redevelopment projects. What's missing, then, is neither that "being there feeling" nor the potential for exploration, but precisely the dynamic and "multi-dimensional" political-aesthetic practice Tabasco has built into its community workshop model over the years. Carrying over the multidimensional engagement of Tabasco's workshop model into the online experience is crucial, because, as Sandra Gaudenzi points out, "each interactive mode carries with it an inherent vision of the world, and our role within it" (Gaudenzi, "The Living Documentary" 19).

Tabasco infuses each stage of its community video workshops with its deep belief in the potential for citizens to intervene in the cultural and political life of the city by contesting existing realities and staging alternative ones. The conversation around gentrification in Marseille was already a charged one that only intensified with the large-scale development projects before and during 2013, Marseille's "Cultural Capital" year.[17] Locals felt pushed aside. Those in Le Panier felt this perhaps most intensely, as denizens of the neighborhood closest to the Old Port, the epicenter of tourism in Marseille where large cruise ships unload their tourists for a day for easy access to bouillabaisse and the mall for souvenirs. In engaging students, citizens, visitors, and local leaders in a broad discussion about changes to the Old Port, the production of *Et Le Panier dans tout ça* constituted an important continuation of Tabasco's intervention in ongoing plans for urban renewal. The web doc stands as an online document of that process.

The challenge for activist groups, then, is to reimagine the shape and significance of the community envisioned by an online work. As Tabasco is well aware, it takes some measure of money and luck to obtain web visibility. Yet, the endeavor remains an important one: the creation of spaces of dissensu—on the ground and online—that can mutually inform and support ongoing community work. Tabasco Video aims to create platforms for democracy, with a commitment to recognizing community and democracy as fundamental messy, unruly, and local. Necessarily, the artistic forms supporting that democratic vision take shape differently online, but the most successfully and multi-dimensionally interactive forms will continue to engage visitors as co-creators of their online work and of their shared social experience.

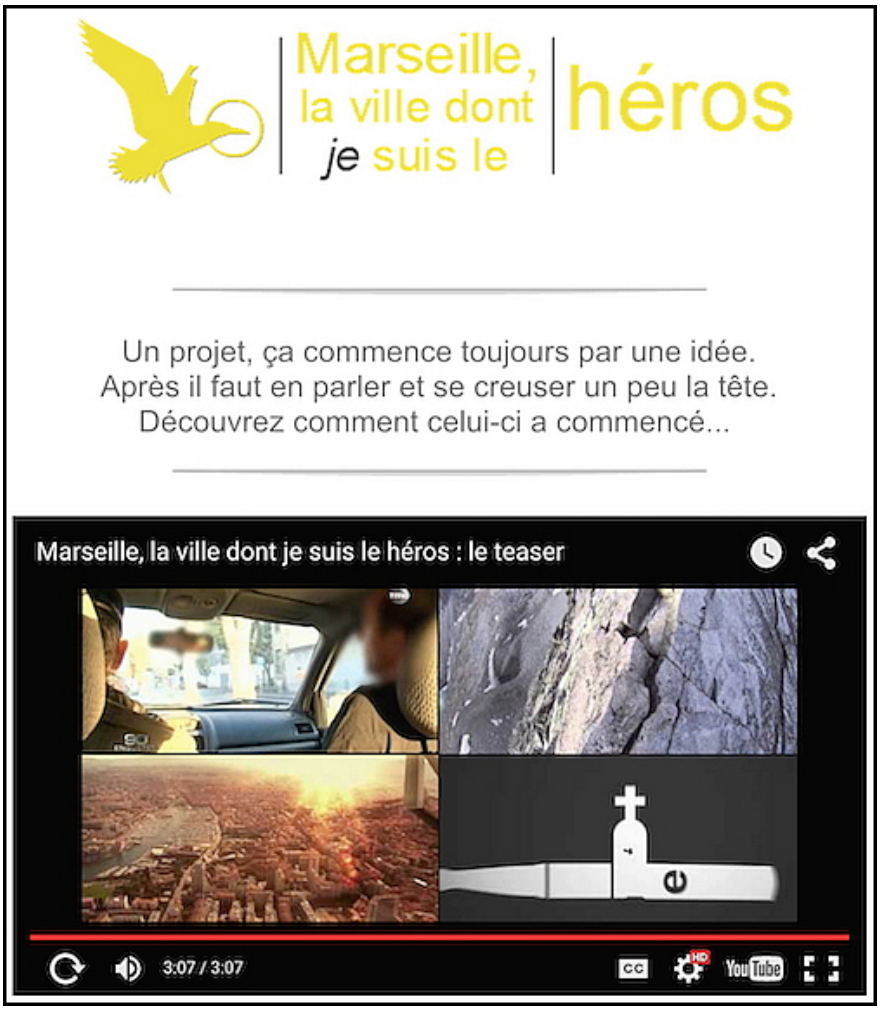
Activist groups seeking new modes of online interaction must contend with the foundational dilemma of traditional activist documentarians: how to engage audiences and encourage what Jane Gaines calls political mimesis, how

> "to align the viewer emotionally with a struggle that continues beyond the frame and into his or her real historical present" (93).

Interactive documentary represents a powerful new form, but one that multiplies and complicates possible frames of connection. Interactive documentarians must perhaps be even more creative in figuring out how to connect filmmakers and audiences to a larger struggle and to analytical frameworks outside the film (Gaines, Kaplan, and Lesage). The subjects, participants, and explorers of online documentary need to learn how to tell their own stories (that they can, how they can, where they can).[11] Tabasco's experience underscores the importance of attending to the life-cycle of the documentary, diffusing textual authority, mapping sites of critical intervention in social processes, and staging "fictions of

the real," as well as creating dynamic documentary forms that live online *and* in the streets. Developing these insights might help move participants and viewers between *frames*, to link multi-dimensional sites of reflection and action. A frame, in this sense, is more protean and labile than the fixed argument of a traditional documentary. As such, the multiple frames of interactive documentaries hold open the promise of political mimesis, of mobilizing bodies and producing affective connections.

New documentary forms, privy to techno-innovations can (though don't automatically) open up new possibilities for collaborative authorship and offer new opportunities for connecting filmmakers, subjects, and users. For their next project, rather than a technological retreat, Tabasco Video is exploring the interactive properties of mobile technologies. *Marseille: La Ville dont je suis le héros* (*The Hero of Marseille*) will enact form of "choose your own adventure," what the directors consider an "emotional journey" in Le Panier. Via a transmedia docu-fiction featuring audio-visual portraits of Marseille denizens, participants will be led through the city via GPS-activated narrative threads. The potential for connection, discovery, and exploration offered by technologies of "geolocalization" has motivated Tabasco to move quickly from interactive webdoc to locative i-docs.



Marseille: La Ville dont je suis le héros (*The Hero of Marseille*), a GPS-activated, urban experience.

There's a certain euphoric, montage effect that accompanies the aimless urban walker. It is this immediate engagement with the social and built environment that attracts mobile media artists and perhaps promises to overcome limitations of "hitchhiking" web documentaries. In moving the sites of interaction from the

laptop to everyday encounters in the urban landscape, mobile technology offers Tabasco a means to keep their activist media art grounded in a lived experience of Marseille, "inscribed in the territory," which has always been a key element of their participative practice. Ultimately, perhaps *Le Héros* will achieve the "bi-directionality" that completes the loop between filmmaker, subjects, online document, and user/spectator and creates a meaningful afterlife for the interactive work. As Gaudenzi expresses it,

> "[In]teractivity is a way to position ourselves in the world, to perceive it and to make sense of it.... [S]uch relation is bi-directional: we affect our environment while we are being affected by it" (70).

With *Le Héros*, Tabasco hopes to extend its artistic methods of political subjectivation not only its workshop participants but to its user/spectators at the other end of the production process, creating "the felt perception of reality by transforming the user into an embodied enactor" (Aston and Gaudenzi 135). Mobile technology suggests the possibility of mobilizing stronger affective ties to the neighborhoods and communities in which Tabasco has worked since its inception. It is these affective ties, as the crucial substrate of political subjectivity, that Tabasco has always aimed to forge, always ready to experiment with, perfect, or move beyond, technical-aesthetic means to do so.

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Notes

1. In French cinema, Marseille also features in Hungarian painter and photographer, László Moholy-Nagy's first film, *Marseille Vieux Port* (1929), Marcel Pagnol's Marseille Trilogy*: Marius* (1931), *Fanny* (1932), and *César* (1936), as well as Denis Gheerbrant's epic, seven-part documentary, *La République Française* (2009), which also addresses neighborhoods affected by the urban renewal plans discussed below. [return to page 1]

2. See Euroméditerranée's webpage for a longer history and description of the urban renewal plan, *now* characterized as the "largest urban renewal project in southern Europe" (Euroméditerranée). http://www.euromediterranee.fr/districts/introduction.html?L=1

3. According to EuroMéditerranée, public sources of funding include the European Union, the French State, the Region (Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur), the Department (Bouches-du-Rhone), the City of Marseille, and the larger metropolitan area. Euroméditerranée estimates that some 7 billion euros will be spent by the end of the project with the lion's share of that funding coming from private sources and with half of that having been spent on phase one (1995-2007). Euroméditerranée 2 began in 2007.

4. In a 2015 article on the continuing gentrification of Marseille, geographer, Elisabeth Dorier estimates that "in 2012 fewer than 60% of Marseille households were taxed on their income" (qtd. in Rescan).

5. Over the long decades of the Euroméditerranée project, neighborhood residents described a host of tactics aimed at forcing out low-income renters since the inception of Euroméditerranée. Some of these, documented by the local organization, "A Downtown for Everyone," have been informal and small-scale, with corrupt landlords pushing current tenants out in the hopes of increasing rents. In Le Panier, residents complain of rising rents, a secondary consequence of the increase in tourism around the revitalized Old Port (Rescan 2015 and Tabasco).

6. Comments translated from an interview with the author on February 26, 2010 at the Federation of VDPQ's headquarters in Aix-en-Provence, France.

7. Unlike U.S. cable-access, airtime is not offered via private cable networks, nor via national or regional TV channels, as with Michel's example of France 3. France 3, a regional network that pays more attention to local issues than national or private channels would, still seemed to shy away from material deemed confrontational or "amateurish," in Michel's estimation, a factor that fueled the development of VDPQ. And local sources of funding (regional, departmental, and municipal) constitute 60% of VDPQ's funding (as opposed to federal sources). Today, VDPQ comprises 28 member groups across 13 regions, producing some 300 hours of programming (see www.vdpq.org).

8. For a variety of interpretations of relationality along these lines, see, in

particular, the chapters by Kate Nash, Jon Dovey, and Adrian Miles in *New Documentary Ecologies*. In her dissertation on interactive documentaries, Sandra Gaudenzi argues, "Behind every type of interactivity lies an assumption of our power to intervene in/with what is around us. When the interactor can just explore, and choose within a closed number of pre-determined options, the assumption is that our world is pre-determined, although full of options, and that our power lies in choosing our path, not in creating or changing such world" (Gaudenzi. "Living Documentaries" 53).

9. Translated from the French. Interview with Benoit Ferrier (Project Lead and Filmmaker) and Élodie Sylvain (Development Officer and filmmaker), 27 January 2010 at Tabasco's headquarters in Le Panier. I accompanied Tabasco on a couple of filming sessions for *100 Paroles* in 2010. In one installment at the Bar des 13 Coins (The 13 Corners Bar) in Le Panier on 12 February 2010, the filmmakers invited anyone in the bar to comment on the front-page issues of the week, which ranged from neighborhood kids having been held overnight in their pajamas at the local police station, to whether recent comments made by a French Socialist Party member were racist. The responses, recorded on camera, were candid and varied.

10. Daniel's full formulation of this political aesthetic quotes Rancière at length: "The configurations and constructions that database documentary, as an art practice that facilitates political subjectivation, [...] constitute a field of intervention that maps directly onto and into 'politics', re-imagining and reconstructing the 'fictions' of the real. Such acts of subjectivation attempt to undo the status quo and implement the only universal in politics: we are all equal' (Rancière 2007: 86)" (Daniel 226).

11. The European Cultural Capital program, initiated in 1985, is likewise a development project with culture as its subject. Cultural Capital years are often situated in less prominent cities of a nation, for example Kosice, Slovakia which was also selected as a Cultural Capital in 2013. The European Commission promotes the project in this manner: "The idea is to put cities at the heart of cultural life across Europe. Through culture and art, European Capitals of Culture improve the quality of life in these cities and strengthen their sense of community. Citizens can take part in the year-long activities and play a bigger role in their city's development and cultural expression. Being a European Capital of Culture brings fresh life to these cities, boosting their cultural, social and economic development. Many of them, like Lille, Glasgow and Essen, have demonstrated that the title can be a great opportunity to regenerate their urban centres, bringing creativity, visitors and international recognition." https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/sites/creative-europe/files/library/ecoc-fact-sheet_en.pdf
[return to page 2]

12. Comments here are translated from French from online and in-person conversations with Nicolas Dupont and other Tabasco members between the summers of 2014 and 2016.

13. See Craig Hight in *New Documentary Ecologies* on software editing tools and the ways in which they can "serve, shape and constrain the development" of documentary forms, among others (219).

14. In a recent conversation, 12 May 2016, Dupont clarified that it makes more sense to rely on coders, who specialize in the specific needs of each project. The technical demands of making good, web-based works, then, requires a certain level of expertise. To his mind, the students' work—their overall process and contribution in the form of interviews, videos, and photographs—ended up being valorized by the quality of the online product. I realized in this conversation that I

was perhaps placing too much value on the teaching of post-production skills. In this case, that would have meant training in web and interaction design, training that would have been time consuming and not necessarily socially engaging. Dupont also pointed out that each online project presents different technical needs and challenges and that's the design work and programming required for one project aren't necessarily applicable to the next.

15. This moment remains, for Dupont, the crowning achievement of the project. In May 2016, Dupont reiterated to me that more important than the online document, for him, is the fact that the students created the documentary together and took pride in seeing it screened publically at a cultural venue as significant as Villa Med.

16. In our conversation of 12 May 2016, Dupont was less concerned about the fixed nature of the final product than the fact that the online documentary had received very few visitors. "Without a lot of financial support, it's impossible to get significant web distribution."

17. See note 2.

18. These lessons include the importance of effective production, distribution, and exhibition techniques in the current documentary eco-system, as Elizabeth Coffman illustrates: "Gershon and Malitsky emphasize the importance of the question of circulation within networks for documentary studies—circulation in terms of the exchange of information, locating how the film arrives at certain facts or evidence; circulation in terms of funds for financing; and circulation of media as connected to a documentary project's exhibition/distribution history. How and why these elements circulate will help to explain the finished film, its political mimetic procedures and its impact" (114).

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



We used to collect shrapnel when you were small, remember?

Gaza Sderot: personifying the conflict

by Jacqueline Levitin

The episode is identified as “December 4th, 2008, Sderot.” On the small screen of the web documentary we see an ordinary-looking Israeli father and his teenage daughter taking a walk up a hill a short distance from their home. Their conversation, however, is not ordinary.



I've been waiting for my draft notice since I was seven.



You're laughing.



Don't laugh - it's true.



“Think about where help is needed in these times.”

“Kassam or mortar?” Ben Abu Haviv, the father, asks, pointing to shrapnel on the ground. “2008 or 1967?”

Lior, his daughter, knows the answers. She is soon to be called up for military service. “It’s something I’ve been dreaming of since age 7!” she tells him. The father scoffs, but Lior defends herself: “I want to be closer to those who are protecting us,” she explains.

"You feel protected these last years!" Haviv retorts. Then he teases: "We've been shot at for eight years and they are waiting for my daughter Lior to save the country!" Better you volunteer in a hospital or in education, or with old people, he advises her. "Think about where help is needed in these times."

I first heard about *Gaza Sderot—Life in Spite of Everything* (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv) a few years after it was mounted on the French broadcaster Arte's website in 2008, and was happy to discover that it was still available. An unpretentious, intimate web series about ordinary life in Israel-Palestine seemed like a miracle. Everything else then available presented as skewed ideologically. Here was a way into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the viewer's terms, at one's own pace. *Gaza Sderot—Life in Spite of Everything* proposed to bring an everyday citizen dimension to the conflict, to show it in a balanced way, and in a new medium.

Web documentary

I began to be interested in web documentary when I undertook my own first forays into the format with *Women in a Changing Downtown Eastside* (2010) (http://womendtes.com), a simple web documentary made in collaboration with student assistants and residents of a poor neighborhood in the heart of Vancouver (Canada).



Women in a Changing Downtown Eastside – my first foray into web documentary

Our web documentary allowed the web user to safely penetrate the reputably dangerous world of Vancouver's downtown eastside, only a few blocks from office tower wealth, where "hotels," originally built to house seasonal workers in the fishing and logging industries (more rooming houses than hotels), had become home to the city's poor, the drug addicted, and a majority of the city's indigenous people. *Women in a Changing Downtown Eastside* offered the user short videos, photos, audio files and Google walks through the neighborhood. It was political in that it introduced the user to the economics and racialization of the drug problem, exposed issues around women, race, poverty and violence, and celebrated community activism in the face of a gentrification that threatened to destroy it.

I hadn't really seen other web documentary when I first saw *Gaza Sderot—Life in Spite of Everything* and its aesthetic and technical sophistication was (and still is) a discovery. Even outside its importance in personalizing the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict, it was a model of documentary journalism, simple it its production, and stylish in its presentation.

The setting

Some historical context is essential to understanding the role that *Gaza Sderot—Life in Spite of Everything* would play in the Middle East conflict upon its release in 2008. In the years prior to 2008, and following peace agreements signed with Egypt in 1979, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had moved away from Israel's southern borders to other regions. The Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000-2005) had brought the conflict to Israeli cities, including Tel Aviv, in the form of suicide bomb attacks. Israel's military response focused on refugee camps in the West Bank. Following the Intifada, Israel waged war in the north in Lebanon against Hezbollah (July-August 2006). Gaza and Sderot, towns on either side of the border many kilometers south of Tel Aviv, were not yet on the radar of the conflict.



Gaza strip May 2005 - Sderot is to the right of the top right corner of Gaza

In the aftermath of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, little remained of the optimism generated by the 1995 Oslo peace process for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Still, some surprising events in the period leading up to the release of *Gaza Sderot* would cause a ripple of change that would impact the two border towns. In 2005, right-wing Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon shocked supporters by expelling some 9000 Jewish settlers from Gaza. Though the right wing in Israel had always stood for territorial expansion, Sharon gave the



A rocket fired from a civilian area in Gaza towards civilian areas in Southern Israel.



Gaza City from Sderot.



Sderot - a view of the city.

impression that he was complying with Oslo's principles; settlers' possessions-laden vehicles drove past Gaza and Sderot back into Israeli territory.

Additionally, in the months preceding the mounting of the web documentary, political developments occurring within Palestinian territory rivaled those happening externally. In January 2006, Hamas won a surprising victory over the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization) in Palestinian legislative elections. My own research indicates that Hamas' electoral victory more likely signaled the falling popularity of the PLO than enthusiasm for the religious practices of Hamas, known formally as the Islamic Resistance Movement. Neither did voters appear to champion Hamas for their prominent role in suicide bombings in Israel since 1993 (cf. Pina "Palestinian Elections"). However, Fatah, the major party of the PLO that had long dominated Palestinian politics, contested Hamas's right to govern. Battles broke out between militant groups of the two parties in early 2006. Fatah's justified its contestation of the electoral results on political-economic grounds, since foreign aid from the Quartet[1] [open endnotes in new window] was dependent on the Palestinian Authority accepting previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements, something Hamas refused to do.

By June 2007, heavy ground fighting between Hamas and Fatah militants left Hamas in control of a Gaza cleared of Jewish settlements. Meanwhile Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas as President of the Palestinian National Authority declared a state of emergency and dissolved the Hamas-dominated Palestinian Legislative Council, placing the PLO back in power in the West Bank. Authority was now geographically divided between Hamas and the PLO.

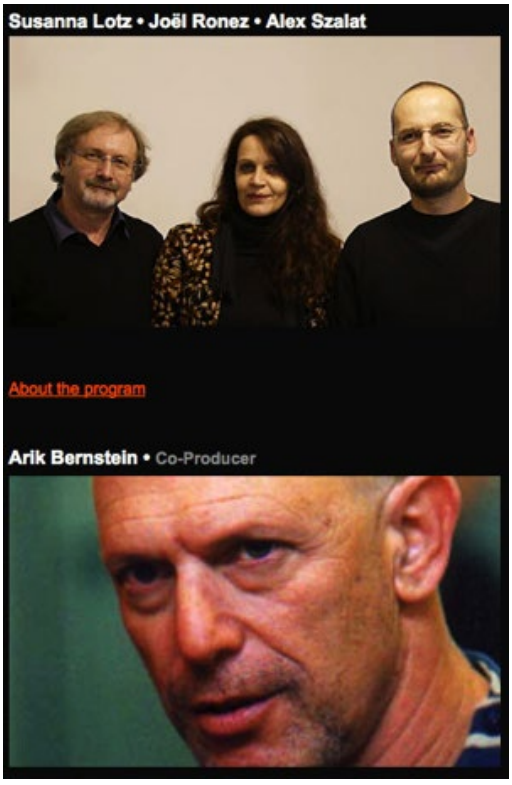
These last events would have an impact on the media role *Gaza Sderot—Life in Spite of Everything* would come to have. With Hamas firmly in power in Gaza, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas's military wing, resumed kassam rocket and mortar attacks against Israel, in particular against nearby Sderot. For its part, Israel launched air strikes and punitive incursions into Gaza. An air, sea and land blockade of Gaza had been imposed by Israel and Egypt when Hamas took power in Gaza on the grounds that Hamas was a 'designated terrorist group.' But on June 19, 2008, a few months before the launch of the web documentary, Egypt brokered a six-month pause in hostilities between Israel and Hamas and an easing of the onerous embargo. Egypt also agreed to interrupt the smuggling of arms across its own border into Gaza. By coincidence, for the time of the shooting of the documentary, from October 26 to December 23, 2008, there was relative peace in the region.

Though what I have just related is the setting for *Gaza Sderot*, the conflict as conflict is not the subject of the web documentary. The web documentary avoids engaging in politics. Instead, focus is on daily life in the city of Gaza, population half a million, suffering from scarcities due to the boycott and Israel's control of Gaza's borders, and on daily life in the Israeli development town of Sderot, barely two miles away, where a nervous population comprising primarily immigrants anxiously awaited the next 'red alert.'



Sderot in forground, with Gaza city in background (Gettyimages, Menahem Kahana).

From October 26 to December 23, 2008, the *Gaza Sderot* website of Arte France, the French Culture television network, followed a number of Gaza and Sderot's men, women and children in daily episodes—one short film from each side per day, five days a week, eight weeks in total, in a format that allowed the viewer to appreciate their situation. Though in the 2 ½-minute-long films, characters occasionally refer to the current brokered pause in hostilities, comment about its effectiveness or question if it will endure, their musings are simply part of their daily lives. "People's lives go on, even in a war zone," announces the Arte website; *Gaza Sderot*'s subject matter is "life in spite of everything."



The production team (from the Arte website)

Making a joint web documentary in times of separation

Arik Bernstein recounts that the original idea for the project was not for a web documentary but for a series of five-minute long films to be broadcast on Israeli television in a spot before the evening news.[2] Founder and producer at Alma Films in Tel Aviv, Arik Bernstein was well known for making films that addressed politics, often indirectly. Recognizing that the Oslo Accords had led to a situation where Jewish Israelis no longer knew their Palestinian neighbors, Bernstein's idea was to re-personalize the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Implementation of the boundary provisions of Oslo had put a stop to the circulation of Jewish Israelis in Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank, while fear generated by the Second (Al-Aqsa) Intifada further reduced Israeli travel. In parallel, Israeli border closures prevented Palestinians from working in Israel as they had previously. Personal contact between the two populations, once common, had thus now become rare. The intended series was to reacquaint Israelis with their neighbors. But Bernstein's projected television spot was cancelled; a reshaping of the original idea was needed.

Bernstein brought aboard Osnat Trabelsi[3] (of Trabelsi Productions), like Bernstein a 'hands on' style of producer known for her left-liberal stance. The two had already collaborated on a film in Gaza.[4] For this new project, they began



Osnat Trabelsi, co-producer, along with Arik Bernstein and Yousef Atwa of *Gaza Sderot*.

discussions with producers on the Gaza side of the border. But Israeli-Palestinian co-productions by 2008 were no longer practicable. When the idea of the film project turned into a web documentary, the producers brought aboard France's Arte[5] under Alex Szalat, Director of the unit "Current Issues & Society and Geopolitics." Arte would be the refigured project's external, neutral production center. The French documentary film production company, Bo Travail!, under Serge Gordey, with whom Bernstein had also worked before,[6] was to serve as Executive Producer. UPIAN, a French company under producer Alexandre Brachet, would provide the web programming, and the CNC (France's National Centre for Cinema and the Moving Image) was to provide the funding. Bernstein relates that it all came together quickly; the team managed the job of designing, financing, and building the website in the space of only ten months—between December 2007 and October 2008 when *Gaza Sderot* went on line.

The production

Although Israeli and Gaza producers were in constant telephone communication, crews on each side of the border worked separately. On the Sderot side, a crew comprising recent graduates and advanced students from Sderot's film school at Sapir College worked under director Robby Elmaliah,[7] with Alma Film's Ayelet Bechar[8] in the role of content editor. On the Gaza side, the producer was Yousef Atwa of the Palestinian news agency Ramattan, with which Bernstein and Trabelsi had worked previously. Ramattan had been founded in 1998 to present "the image of what was taking place here through Palestinian eyes" since "foreign media organizations were not objective in transmitting what was taking place here" (Hadad). Also connected with Ramattan were producer-cameramen Ahmed Shehada and Ibrahim Yaghi. Direction was under Khalil Mahmoud al Muzayyen. [9] On both sides, two-person production crews were equipped with unimposing prosumer-style cameras (Gilinsky).



Satellite map. North Gaza with Sderot to the right of the 1950 Armistice Line

Producers on each side found their documentary subjects among individuals they knew directly or indirectly. As Bernstein had originally conceived for the television project, the focus was to be on ordinary citizens; there would be no politicians and no military people. From Bernstein, too, came the imperative that

the lives of the web documentary subjects include an evolving story, something that could generate audience interest to span the eight-weeks of the web documentary's postings and create an emotional bond.

The work was intense. Each day, one episode each from Gaza and Sderot was filmed on location, edited, then sent to France for translation and subtitling into French, German, English, and Hebrew or Arabic, and posted on the Arte France's website.[10] Between October 26 and December 23, 2008, 40 episodes were posted, 80 videos in all. The original plan called for six stories of six characters from each side to allow each to be seen once a week. In actuality, there are seven characters on the Israeli side, and six main and one minor character on the Gaza side, and the number of episodes per character varies. Bernstein explains that the number of episodes per character posted on the website depended on the interest they generated. In Gaza, the 'minoring' of one character appears to have resulted from his unanticipated absence.



Gaza Sderot—the main page

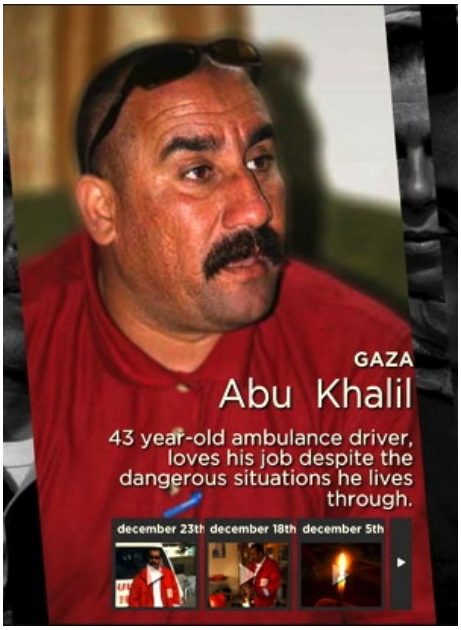
Documentary subjects: Gaza

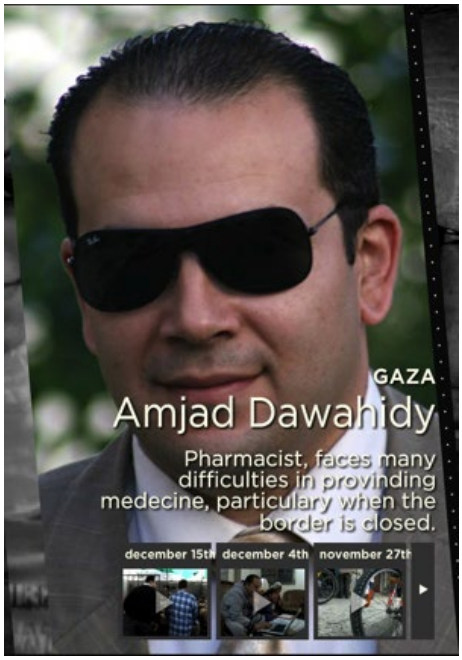
> [Editors' note: open links to the web documentary episodes in new windows as you read the text in this essay.]

In Gaza, producer Yousef Atwa recounts, individuals agreed to be followed because no one else was telling their stories. Relative to the Sderot stories, as a viewer, I sense an urgency in the videos from Gaza. Neither crew nor characters lose time communicating the harshness of life under the boycott. Though Israel had officially withdrawn from Gaza in 2005, characters complain, Gaza was 'under occupation' just the same.

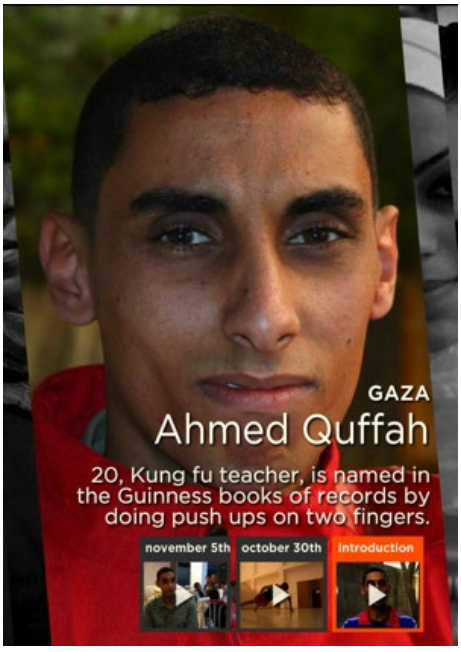
Characters are fairly matched on either sides of the border; there's an approximate symmetry: a young kung fu fighter in Gaza, a young boxer in Sderot; aspiring teenage girls on both sides; musicians/performers on both sides; middle-aged women on each side, middle-aged men, characters with big families, etc. Producer Atwa says he initially had difficulty getting access to potential subjects in Gaza because of the restrictive media environment under Hamas. "They were

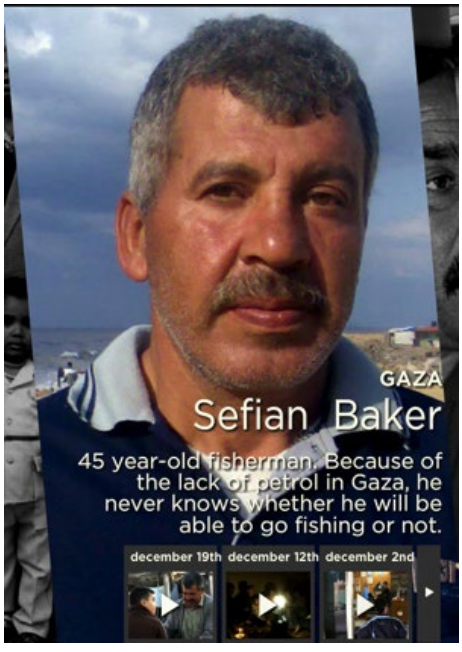
initially concerned about opening up their homes and personal lives to us, but we reassured them by telling them that we will not be political" (Gilinsky).





Gaza characters include Abu Khalil, a long-time ambulance driver from Jabaliya refugee camp in Gaza city. We accompany Abu Khalil on the road, hearing that the arbitrary intransigence of Israeli border guards often endangers the lives of patients he transports (cf. the November 7, 2008 episode, http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/11_07_2008_gaza_abu-khalil-and-pregnant-woman). From Gaza, too, is Amjad Dawahidy, a pharmacist who complains he can't get the medicines he needs because of Israel's control of the borders. Dawahidy has difficulties Skyping family in Jordan because of the blackouts. 'But are they having blackouts in Aman, too?' he wonders when his internet connection is suddenly cut off (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/#/faces/17/12_04_2008_gaza_chat-on-the-net); he is filmed playing backgammon in the dark.





At age 20, Kung fu teacher Ahmed Quffah is 'already famous'—"named in the





Guinness Book of Records for doing push ups on two fingers." Sefian Baker is a fisher. He and a fellow fisher complain that finding fish requires going off shore, but they don't dare because soldiers have already killed twenty fishers who went beyond Israel's arbitrary boundaries (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/12_19_2008_gaza_we-are-surrounded-from-all-parts). In any case, complains Baker, Israeli control of Gaza's borders means that he has no fuel to run his boat. Khalaf Qassim, from Deir al-Balah refugee camp in the middle of Gaza territory, is a musician and leader of a folklore group that performs at weddings. We first see him as he is forced to travel to a wedding by ox cart. The wedding party is counting on him, he explains, so he will get there no matter the lack of petrol. Later, he performs in style, having found enough fuel to run a diesel generator, sidestepping Israel's imposed electricity crisis (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/11_25_2008_gaza_too-noisy-generator). Most of the humor on the Gaza side of the web documentary comes in Qassim's exchanges with a friend.

Then there are the women—the outspoken farmer, Madeha Abu Nada, and the affable young Heba Safi.

Gaza producer Atwa told journalist Jaron Gilinsky that Muslim women were generally reluctant to appear in the web documentary. He managed to overcome this obstacle by choosing less religious characters (Gilinsky). This clarifies the role of Heba, a hijab-wearing but impressively freely circulating young woman who aspires to be a documentary filmmaker. Still in high school, Heba is a member of the Young Journalists Club. We first see her alone, approaching a café where she intends to film "Palestinian youth in distress." We are immediately struck by the young woman's pluck: young Heba is the only female in the crowded coffee shop (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/11_04_2008_gaza_heba-at-coffee-shop). We are also reminded that class differences exist in Gaza when we see Heba's parents' well-appointed home in a later episode. Heba regularly invites her female classmates to her home for refreshments. They tell her about the marriages she has missed while recuperating from her tonsil operation. We have already witnessed the operation in an prior episode, conducted in a private clinic Heba's family can afford.

Other women sometimes appear in the background in scenes featuring a male character. Such is a scene showing fisher Sefian Baker with his family (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/11_20_2008_gaza_lunch-at-the-bakers). Lacking cooking fuel because of the blockade, Baker gets a wood fire going so that his family can eat their meal. (They will be 30 for lunch, he explains to neighbors.) Baker's wife is featured commenting on the fuel problem. Abu Khalil's mother is similarly encouraged to recount about the 'good old days' when women would make bread three times a day in wood-fired clay ovens—a good solution for the Israeli-caused fuel crisis and resulting bread shortage, Abu Khalil appears to feel. Khalil's wife is noticeably silent on the subject. (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/12_05_2008_gaza_shlomo-keys)

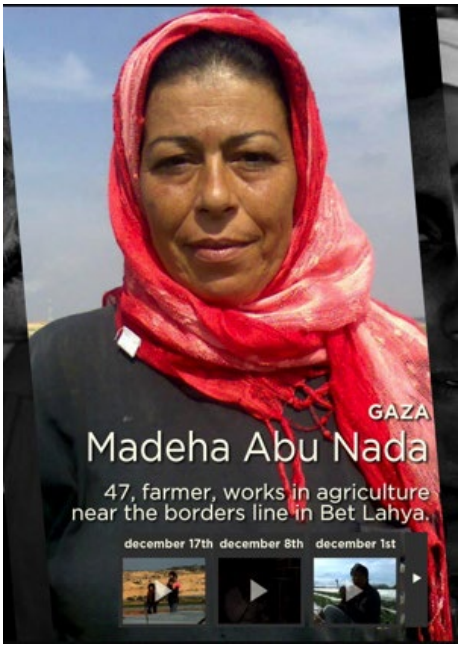
To my Westerner's eyes, women are at times strikingly absent from the Gaza episodes. An example is the episode where the father of kung fu teacher, Ahmed Quaffah, has put on a surprise banquet to celebrate his son's achievements and forthcoming competition in Cairo. When the camera exposes the rows of seated guests, I am startled to note that not one woman has been invited to the feast. (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/11_05_2008_gaza_a-future-kung-fu-champion)

A Gaza woman who definitely is seen is Madeha Abu Nada. A middle-aged strawberry farmer and mother of three, Madeha Abu Nada is boss of her enterprise in Bet Lahya, near the border in the northeastern area of Gaza, and her carefully tended fields are beautiful (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/11_12_2008_gaza_madiha-strawberries-are-her-children). This Gaza farmer is



Heba Safi intends to film “Palestinian youth in distress.

articulate and outspoken in her comments about closed borders and consequently ruined crop sales. Her independence is certainly distinct from the other women characters in *Gaza Sderot*—both Israeli and Gazan. Madeha’s character and ease in front of the camera baffled me until I read that it was Madeha that the Israeli producer, Osnat Trabelsi, had previously featured in the second documentary she made in association with Ramattan.[11] While closed borders now prevented Trabelsi from working directly with her old friend, the web documentary at least allowed Trabelsi to see Madeha in the virtual world (Gilinsky).





Madeha Abu Nada in her strawberry fields in Gaza.

Go to page 2

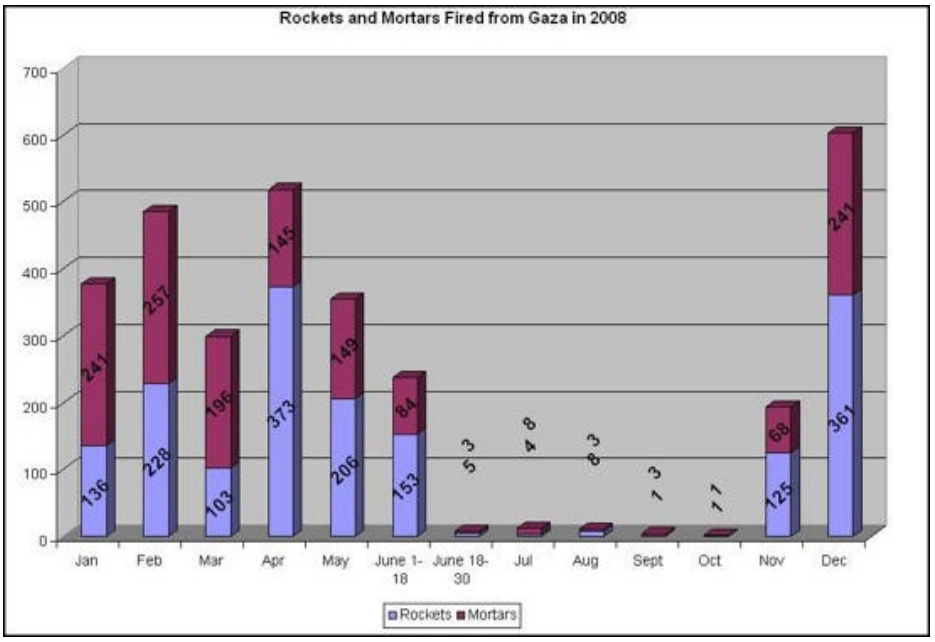
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Documentary subjects: Sderot

Like Madeha in Gaza, the Israeli character, Yafa Malka, a middle-aged hairdresser and mother of three, laments that war has forced her town's youth to leave their birthplace. Characters such as Yafa Malka on the Israeli side appear chosen as much for their personalities as their message—understandable since everyone's message in Sderot appears to be the same: "Rocket attacks rule lives in Sderot."



Sderot is in the 10km-15sec Grad rocket range—Israel Defense Force.

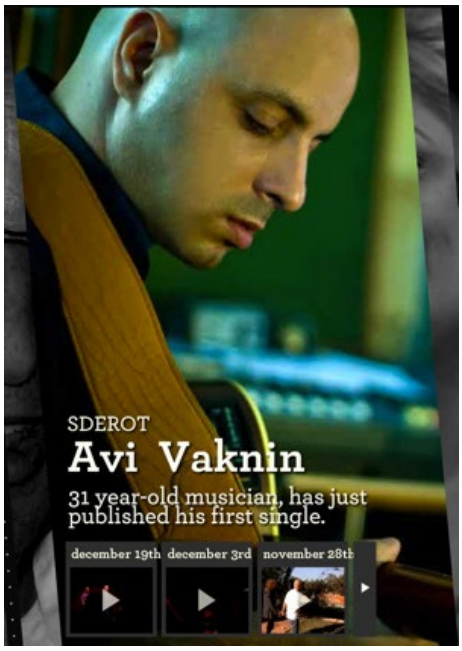
Yafa Malka alternates between exuberant and subdued. One scene finds her joking with her clients, then bemoaning the anxiety that has caused her own and others' heart conditions; she confesses to no longer having the will to take shelter from rocket attacks.[12] [open notes in new window] In another scene, Yafa defends an old Palestinian merchant friend who regularly travels from Hebron in the West Bank to Sderot to sell his wares. Outside her shop, Yafa is seen jauntily playing the mini keyboard her friend is delivering when he is verbally assaulted by a passing Israeli who calls for 'the terrorists' to go home. Yafa Malka shouts back that her friend is no terrorist. Her defense of him is calm but insistent, and a little sad. Moments before, her newly uniformed nephew arrived, seeming hesitant to join his aunt and her Palestinian friend. "Of course," he has replied to the camera crew, he has chosen to be in a combatant unit for his military service. Yafa Malka expresses her hope that this young soldier will return unharmed and that her Palestinian friend will find peace (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/12_18_2008_sderot_a-terrorist-merchant).

Likeable, too, but more subdued than Yafa Malka, is the young Russian émigré, Andre Avhalikov. Age18½, Andre is an aspiring boxer and already a local champion although still in high school. He goes regularly to the gym to work with his trainer. We later discover, however, that Andre must forego taking part in an important upcoming competition because he has missed too many workouts. He



is responsible for his little sister, he explains simply to the camera, and can't bring her with him to practice because the gym offers no protection from rockets attacks. (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/11_10_2008_sderot_andre-and-his-little-sister)





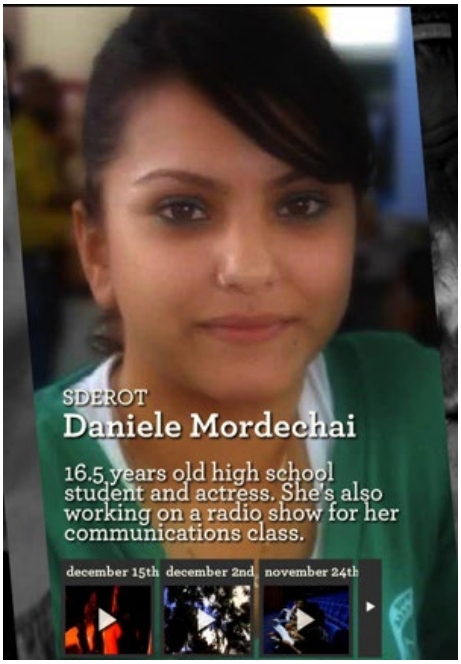
Avi Vaknin, a singer-songwriter in his early 30s, has just released his first single. He rehearses in bomb shelters that have already provided practice space for other up and coming musicians. Sderot, it seems, has a reputation for inspiring compositions with haunting lyrics. (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/10_26_2008_sderot_sderot-blues)

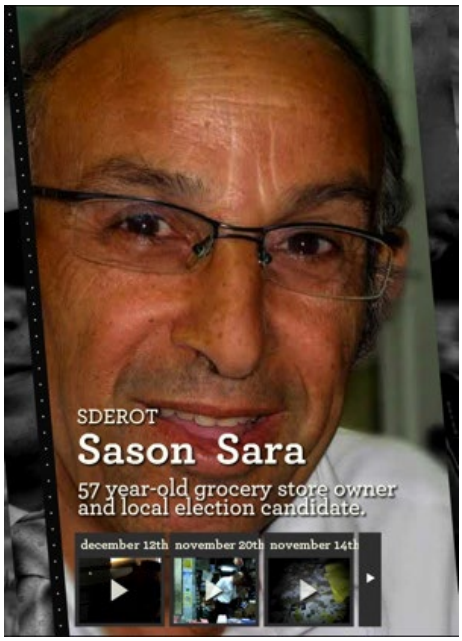
Sixteen-year-old high school student, Daniele Mordechai, has ambitions to be an actor. In one episode, we see her playing 'red alert' at a playground with her babysitting charges. 'If a rocket attack warning sounds,' she instructs the children, 'run and hide in the big worm.' The giant worm's 60-centimeter thick walls are a clever disguise for a bomb shelter (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/12_02_2008_sderot_let-play-red-alert).



Avi Vaknin (with the guitar) and his group practices in bomb shelters.

I note that the introductory episode with Sderot grocer, Sason Sara, still manages to be about rocket attacks. Sason Sara's store lies in disorder for want of attention while (typically) he is occupied writing letters for his customers—in this episode for a neighbor applying for assistance for rocket attack damage (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/#/faces/6/10_27_2008_sderot_the-grocer-who-wants-to-change-the-world). Sara has hopes to become Sderot's mayor and the camera finds him when he gets his unhappy election results several episodes later. Betrayed by those he helped and whom he thought supported him, Sason Sara is comforted by his wife and friends.





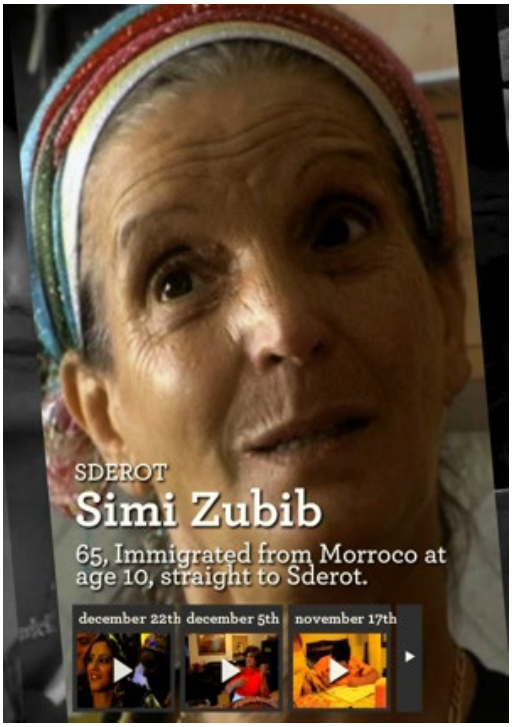
The wife of Ben Abu Haviv, the father who identifies rocket attack shrapnel with his daughter and the artist who constructed the bomb shelter in the form of an imaginative worm, tells the camera that she wants to leave Sderot because she can no longer stand the tension. But stalwart Ben Abu Haviv declares his intention to stay[13]: It seems that those who can are leaving; those who remain in Sderot are either idealists or without the mean to choose. (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/#/time/88)





A bombshelter shaped like a work in a children's playground.

Born in Morocco, Simi Zubib, age 65, likely has no choice about staying in Sderot but appears happy nonetheless. Though she immigrated to Israel at age 10, she explains that she is illiterate; her role has always been in the kitchen. A mother of ten, Simi is religious. Her two weekly escapes from the kitchen are a trip to the market to buy clothes for the family, or to buy food. In one episode, she is making a big holiday meal for her family. However, she explains, her daughter from Tel Aviv won't be coming because she is too afraid of the rocket attacks. Indeed, we see that there is no place to hide in the Zubib family home when a Red Alert does occur in the midst of a filming session. (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/#/faces/12/11_07_2008_sderot_immigration-and-kassams)

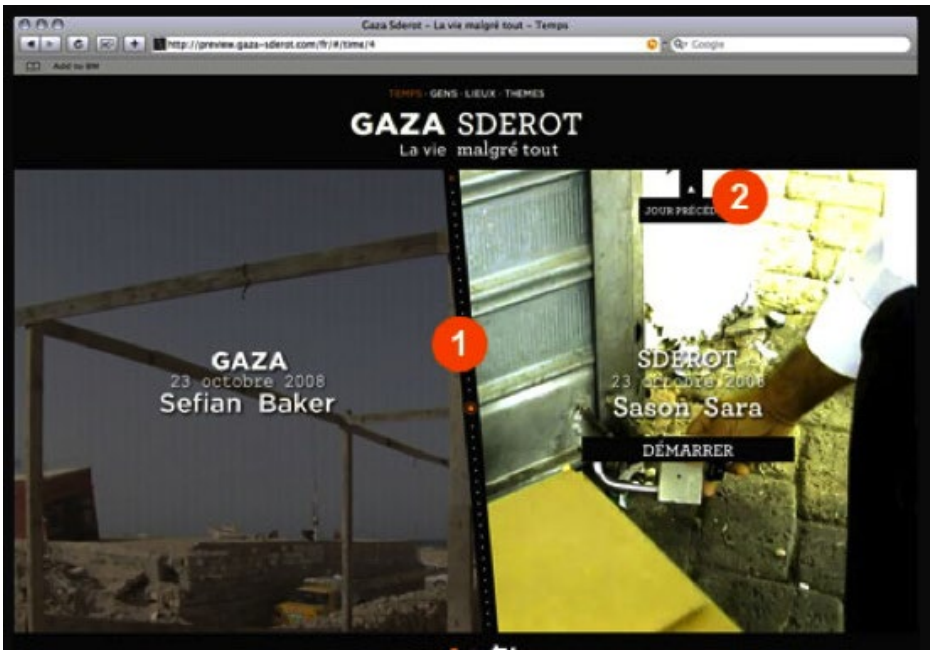


Journalist Gilinsky writes that Gaza producer, Atwa, who was watching the Sderot clips as they came out, told him he was surprised to learn that so many of Sderot's inhabitants were of Moroccan origin. There are so many similarities with people of Gaza, Atwa told Gilinsky. "We are both victims of this terrible situation;" "both our governments don't really listen to us."[14] "The main difference," Atwa stated, "is that our suffering in Gaza is much worse than in Sderot" (Gilinsky).

Constructing the web documentary

Matching themes running through the two sets of films are brought out in the 55-minute version of the web documentary that was broadcast three times on Arte in February 2009, two months after the web documentary was completed.[15] Yafa Malka's reminiscing about the 'good old day's before Oslo, for example, when Israeli Jews felt safe visiting Gaza city (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/11_26_2008_sderot_happy-days-of-coexistence), is made to resonate with the episode with fisher Sefian Baker listening to his friend's reminiscing about Gaza's good old days when he could take his boat far out to sea and bring back a bountiful catch to sell to Israeli customers (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/12_19_2008_gaza_we-are-surrounded-from-all-parts). In the web documentary, viewers have to make such connections themselves.

Web viewers, however, likely did not watch all episodes. On December 16 (six days before the project was completed), Executive Producer Serge Gordey, who was keeping an eye on viewership statistics, said the site was getting "an average of 10,000 hits per day with people spending an average of eight minutes on the site, or watching about four webisodes"(Gilinsky).



"How to" instructions—inventing web documentary interactive techniques in

David Dufresne, mentor of the "Web Lab," argues that “a filmmaker’s perspective lies in the information base, in all the pieces of information the viewer can access” (“Interview of David Dufresne, mentor of the ‘Web Lab’”). In this sense, *Gaza Sderot* could be said to offer “personal, interactive and non-linear access,” just as the web documentary describes itself (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/ar/about/). It is also liberal, undirected and well-designed. And it is sophisticated in its presentation despite the modest total budget of $265,000. The absence of an exposé of political context, together with a wealth of viewing possibilities, indicates the producers’ willingness to trust the viewer’s own interaction with the web documentary.

The viewer first selects a language for viewing from Arabic, Hebrew, English, French and German. Although the main page (the ‘Time’ tab where one first finds oneself), proposes a growing timeline with a video from Gaza on the left, and a video from Sderot on the right showing what was happening simultaneously, viewers can choose to click anywhere on the timeline and watch any episode in whatever sequence.



The "timeline"—Gaza on the left, Sderot on the right.

They can choose to watch all episodes involving the same character one after the other by clicking on the ‘Faces’ tab and rolling their cursor over the participants’ faces to make a selection—a face in the black and white lineup of characters expanding and changing to color when a selection becomes possible. It is also (‘is’ because the website is still up and running) possible to pick videos from a satellite map indicating where each was shot and to watch episodes according to location. “At all moment (sic), you can zoom and displace yourself on the maps,” instructions explain. All the viewing possibilities are clearly laid out at http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/help.



“Faces” approach—Gaza characters on the left, Sderot on the right. The face becomes enlarged and in color when the cursor crosses the image.

Likewise, the viewer is able to arrange their viewing by subject matter and see all the videos that pertain to a particular topic (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/ar/#/topics/). The number of episodes associated with each topic gives an indication of the concerns of the characters and, likely also, the interests or cautions taken by the crew filming. For example, there is only one episode dealing with ‘religious/secular’ from the Sderot side of the border and none at all from Gaza, though religion could easily have been addressed in either locale. The highest scoring topic on the Gaza side goes to ‘siege’ (16 episodes), with ‘borders’ (12) and ‘electricity’ and ‘shortage’ (10 each) close behind. Not surprisingly, on the Sderot side, the highest score is for “Kassam rockets” (18 episodes). Interestingly, and echoing assumptions of the producers of *Gaza Sderot*, more appears to join



The inventive "topics" approach offers a comparison of concerns in the two cities.

the two towns than separate them: 'Family' scores 11 in both locales; 'money' gets 8 on the Sderot side and 7 in Gaza; 'optimism' wins over 'pessimism' 6 to 5 in Gaza, and 9 to 4 in Sderot; and 'humour' is a topic in 6 episodes in Gaza and 3 in Sderot. Interestingly, I note, in Gaza, humour typically takes the form of irony, the misery-born wit of the underdog traditionally associated with Jewish humour. [As an example, Ahmed Quffah's friend says they will have to create currency from leaves since they don't have any Israeli shekels (the currency of the region)—grape leaves will make good 20-shekel notes, but a banana leaf should be worth 200! (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/#/faces/1/12_09_2008_gaza_to-create-local-currency)]

Web documentary was still a new format in 2008, which explains *Gaza Sderot* relatively minor impact when it was first mounted. Although the 'about' page indicates that the producers envisioned the site having 'blogs, forums, etc.' in addition to the videos, in reality, little of that occurs: Producers blog but very few respond. As Bernstein notes, the problem was that *Gaza Sderot* predated the popularization of social media. In 2008, Twitter as a tool to publicize the production and as a place to react was in its infancy. The producers, Bernstein says, did little in the way of outreach, using only radio and newspaper articles to promote the series since as a state broadcaster Arte couldn't advertise. As well, he notes, Israelis were then not accustomed to following stories on the web; television was the more familiar medium.

Notably, despite the electrical blackouts, it was still possible in 2008 to view the web doc in Gaza because "Gaza Sderot' was made available in both broad band and in lower resolution. But the series was not well known in Gaza either. Nor was it frequently viewed in other locales in the Middle East. According to Bernstein, the primary audience for *Gaza Sderot* was France and the United States.

What catapulted *Gaza Sderot* into the public eye is what happened after the web documentary was formally completed. The military campaign against Hamas that Israel called "Operation Cast Lead" began December 27, 2008, by chance three days after the last episode of *Gaza Sderot* had been posted on Arte's website. Suddenly attention was focused on the work of film crews who had been there before the war broke out. The production team immediately realized they had a subject of vital interest. They wanted to continue filming with the documentary characters, but because of attacks, the producers in Gaza were unreachable ("Video project highlights life on the border").

Gaza Sderot went on to win several prizes[16] and was a nominee for the International Digital Emmy Award.[17]



"Maps" approach—location of videos with the Gaza characters on the left, Sderot on the right. User clicks to see the video.

Outcomes

Was *Gaza Sderot* the web documentary a success? The means to judge success in the medium of the web documentary is still beginning to be developed (Nash; Nash et al.). As a learning experience, for me what stood out in the Gaza videos (I mention Gaza because for me it was the less familiar territory) were class differences (i.e. the existence of an economically comfortable class in Gaza when all I had viewed previously concentrated exclusively on scarcity), and similarly, the incongruence between the number of unemployed youth in the café and an abundance of cakes on offer. As noted, I was also struck by the clear separation of males and females in the social world, but also by the simple gestures of kindness between people (e.g. as Amjad, the pharmacist, stands in line at the bakery, a man who doesn't need his quota of bread proposes that it be given to another). Did these elements also strike other viewers? In the space for comments joined to each episode, only the occasional episode received a good number of remarks; many received none at all. Comments were in French, English, and, less often, in German or Hebrew or Arabic—with speakers of Hebrew and Arabic apparently most often using English instead. Lengthy comments, and more opinionated comments were more common at the beginning of the series. A few entries posed questions or left web addresses where viewers could seek more information. Most commenters seemed to grasp the web doc's appeal to view the similarities between the two sides. My personal observations about class aspects were not generally echoed (though incongruously, one viewer from Sderot taunted the producers to show the wealthy of Gaza), However there was frequent appreciation for the shared humanity of the characters on both sides, echoing my own appreciation for gestures of kindness. A few commentators persisted in spewing invectives.

To an episode with Yafa Malka where she and others comment about the 'good old days' when they would frequently visit Gaza and Gazans came to them (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/en/#/faces/8/11_26_2008_sderot_happy-days-of-coexistence), I came across a strikingly political reply from what I thought was a viewer:

> "I grew up in the center of Israel, near Tel Aviv, where we seldom met real-life Palestinians. To me, what the people of Sderot are saying sounds a bit like how a master would remember his subordinate — friendly, nostalgic, but always above. Indeed, most of Sderot is politically right wing, prodding our government to make no

> concessions. In contrast, the people I grew up with and whose example I followed, left wing liberals of European descent, had a sympathy to the Palestinians which was mainly theoretical — never marred by memories of living together in the old country or by day to day business transactions or disputes."
> (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/blog/index.php?post/2008/11/26/The-Good-Old-Days)

It was only when I read the 'Blog' did I realize that this comment was actually made by Ayelet Bechar of Alma Films, content editor on *Gaza Sderot*—not an ordinary spectator.

Similarly, in the comments section to the ambulance driver, Abu Khalil's, episode about Israeli soldiers' refusing to allow a pregnant Gaza woman to cross the border for treatment, though she has the necessary permit, it is Yousef Atwa, the Gaza producer, who replies to an irritated 'Enrique from Israel.' The Israeli questions the right of Gaza's sick even to go to Israel for treatment since they do not pay Israeli social security fees. He suggests (apparently not with irony) that they should be sent to Egypt instead. Then, directing his attack at *Gaza Sderot*'s production team, the Israeli accuses the web documentary's producers of hiding from the 'real' question, which is, "Why is the city of Ashqelon [in Israel] which provides medical attention and electricity to Gaza constantly shelled with Kassam rockets?" Atwa struggled with his English to present the producers' point of view. (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/he/11_07_2008_gaza_abu-khalil-and-pregnant-woman/en/)

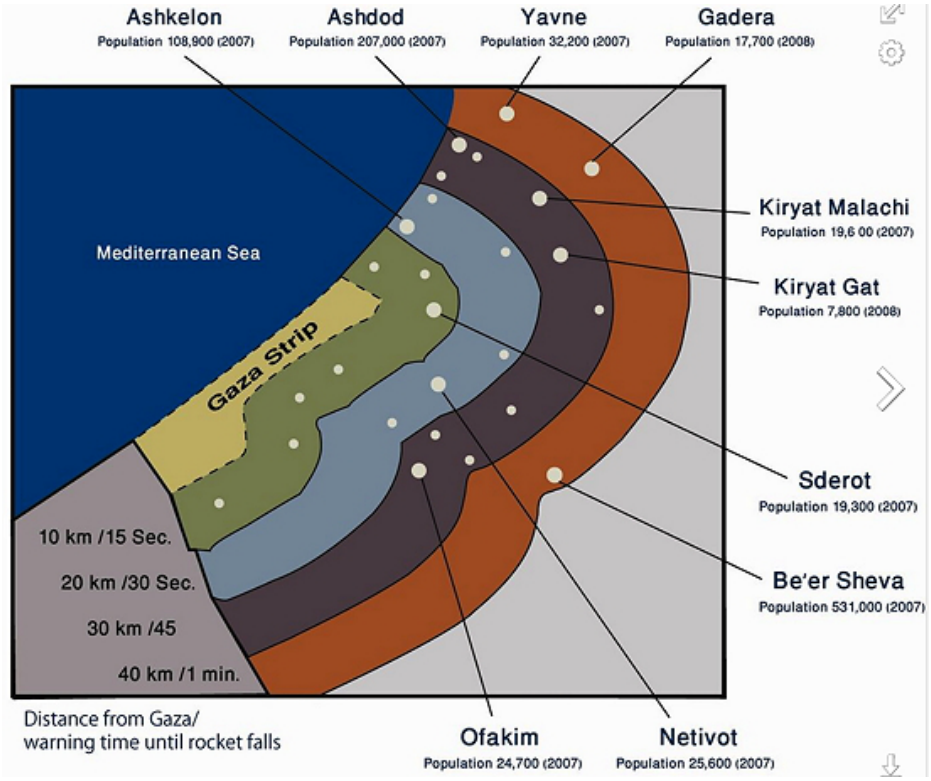
Though Atwa could have defended the episode with a strong analysis of Israel's economic relationship with Palestine, he justifies the episode simply by speaking of the sorely inadequate medical facilities in Gaza, and the dangers of decisions made according to soldiers' moods—points already made in the online episode. He avoids the Ashqelon challenge of 'Enrique from Israel' in his reply.

But should Atwa have replied in the comments section in the first place? Though directly challenged to do so, replying to comments presumes a lack of trust that other viewers will make the producers' points for them. The same day that Atwa replied, an American Jew argued the necessity, from a purely moral position, of helping the sick no matter who they are. Humbly, she notes, Americans also "still have difficulty not to pre-judge another based on colour or background." She says she wholeheartedly hopes "that we can get past our differences and see the overwhelming commonalities"—a worthy reply for Atwa.

The etiquette for online replies and for appropriate responses from producers was relatively undeveloped in 2008. That in *Gaza Sderot* the production team *wanted* to blog and reply shows them personally engaged in their web endeavor and unable to stand aside or to speak only of production matters.

The war ends

Operation Cast Lead ended in a unilateral ceasefire by Israel on January 18, 2009, followed by a ceasefire by Hamas twelve hours later. Not having managed to resume the web documentary when the escalation of hostilities began, the producers felt it was necessary to at least add new videos from the war in the Blog section. They only succeeded in doing so after the fighting ceased and things settled down. They shot four videos from each side, produced in association with B'Tselem (the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), and posted these on the Arte France website between March 26 and April 14, 2009. One viewer insensitively complained that these episodes did not appear in the normal regular intervals.



Sderot in green rocket range.

Executive Producer Serge Gordey; Producer Arik Bernstein; and documentary characters, musicians Avi Vaknin and Khalaf Qassim, appeared together in a short radio document on PRI (Public Radio International) on December 30, 2008 while the war was still raging ("Video project highlights life on the border"). Here, Serge Gordey proposes that *Gaza Sderot* was an antidote to Middle East compassion fatigue engendered by seemingly non-stop reports of violence in Israel-Palestine. Yes, "the Gaza Sderot video project lets you be a fly on the wall for the intimate and mundane moments of people's lives," adds the radio host; "the power of these films is that they remind you that people in conflict zones are really just like everyone else." "When you realize that people have the same issues about work or about love, about raising your kids, in places where you don't first think in these terms, well then I get the feeling that we're doing good work," Gordey concluded; "and that happened quite a few times." But, he added, "it's a bit depressing to think that we spent a year showing that, you know, life goes on, and the day that we finished, the war broke out.

Rammatan

It is important to note that the ground and air attack of Operation Cast Lead drastically changed the situation in Gaza. In the PRI interview, reporter Carol Zall explains that she had tried to reach the Gaza team while fighting continued, but telephone communication was impossible. A note with a later transcript of the radio interview reassures that no one from the Gaza team was injured in the Israeli attacks ["Video project highlights life on the border" (audio transcript)].

Ramattan, the news agency of Gaza producer Atwa, played a major role during the 22-days of Israel's "Operation Cast Lead." Ramattan recorded footage of what was taking place in Gaza under difficult and dangerous conditions. With foreign news agencies not present, theirs was often the only footage sent to worldwide cable-news markets; it was broadcast on television screens across the globe.[18]



Still shot from video footage filmed on the 18th day of the War on Gaza (Jan. 13, 2009) showing the destruction sustained from Israeli-Palestinian clash in the area. Date: 13 January 2009. Source: Al Jazeera English. War On Gaza Day 18, still image at 00:44s. Al Jazeera has a large Creative Commons image repository.

Ramattan's images were praised in *The Electronic Intifada* by Gideon Levy, a columnist at the left-leaning Israeli newspaper, *Ha'aretz*, and a member of its editorial board: "The whole world saw the images. They shocked every human being who saw them, even if they left most Israelis cold," he wrote. "The conclusion is that Israel is a violent and dangerous country, devoid of all restraints and blatantly ignoring the resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, while not giving a hoot about international law. The investigations are on their way." (https://electronicintifada.net/content/ramattans-war-worlds-eyes-gaza/8078)

Gaza Sderot is not the only web documentary made on the Israel Palestine conflict, but, to date, it is the most ambitious and, despite the engagement of its producers, the most balanced in its approach.[19]

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Notes

[1] Quartet on the Middle East: the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations. [return to page 1]

[2] I interviewed Arik Bernstein in Tel Aviv on June 1, 2015. Factual information on the production of *Gaza Sderot* not otherwise noted here comes from this personal interview.

[3] Osnat Trabelsi's family is from Tunisia and her grandparents settled near Sderot. Cf http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/blog/index.php?post/2008/11/18/Gaza-Sderot-and-I

[4] *Gaza—another kind of tears*, 2006, directed by Abed El Salam Shehada, is a co-production of Alma Films, Trabelsi Productions, Ramattan Studios and ARTE France. Osnat Trabelsi also produced *Sadot Adumim* (*Strawberry Fields*) directed by Ayelet Heller and shot in Gaza in 2007.

[5] Arte had been co-producer of *Gaza—another kind of tears*. Cf note 'iv' above.

[6] Serge Gordey is credited as a writer on *Six Days: June 1967: 40 Years, New Revelations*, on the 1967 Six-day war, produced by Arik Bernstein and broadcast in 2007. Of note, Gordey was later one of the producers of the 2013 Oscar-nominated *Five Broken Cameras* (2011).

[7] cf Roby Elmaliah's blog post at http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/blog/index.php?post/2008/10/27/Filmmaker-in-Sderot

[8] Ayelet Bechar's own film, *Just Married* (2005) treats both Israeli and occupation marital situations. "Documenting the Middles East." *P.O.V.* No. 22. http://pov.imv.au.dk/Issue_22/section_1/artc3A.html

[9] Khalil Mahmoud al Muzayyen was born in Rafah refugee camp. He trained to become a filmmaker in Russia after working for many years as a builder in Israel. cf http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/blog/index.php?post/2008/10/29/Filmmaker-in-Gaza

[10] See Alexandre Brachet's blog about the production process: http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/blog/index.php?post/2008/10/28/Say-thanks-to-Overstream

[11] The documentary is *Strawberry Fields*, July 2006, directed by Ayelet Heller. See http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/blog/index.php?post/2008/11/18/Gaza-Sderot-and-I

[12] I interviewed Yafa Malka in Sderot in June 2015. Her nerves are shot, she complained, and her heart condition is now worse. [return to text]

[13] Ben Abu sounds much less stalwart in the description Ayelet Bechar (content editor, Sderot) gives of him in her Blog post: "He says that in the last few years his life is in a stand still. Because of Kassams, he can't move forward with his projects.

His yard was hit, and since then he didn't fix it. His street was hit, two children died, and he can't bring himself to finish painting the walls of his home. He also says that he stopped thinking about the other side, about the children of Gaza. He ran out of empathy." http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/blog/index.php?post/2008/11/17/A-Rocket-rookie%3A-my-first-Red-Color-alarm

[14] Sderot director, Roby Elmaliah, makes a similar claim about the Israeli government's neglect of Sderot: http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/blog/index.php?post/2008/10/27/Filmmaker-in-Sderot

[15] Serge Gordey is credited as director, along with the original directors, Robby Elmaliah and Khalil al Muzayyen. See http://www.arte.tv/fr/Videos-sur-ARTE-TV/2282584.html (with French subtitles)

[16] The UER (l'Union Européenne deRadio-Télévision) awarded « Gaza-Sderot: la vie malgré tout » the prize for best documentary program of 2008. It received "Le Prix Europa" in the category "Best European Emerging Media Project of the Year 2008."

[17] Serge Gordey, Alexandre Brachet, and Alex Szalat of Arte generally replicated the format of Gaza-Sderot in a subsequent production, *Havana/Miami* produced two years later. The new production encouraged viewers to respond with videos and photos in addition to written comments.

[18] According to the International Middle East Media Centre, November 12, 2009, "The administration of the Ramattan news agency in Gaza decided on Wednesday to shut its offices down until further notice due to repeated attacks and violations by the Hamas-controlled security forces in the Gaza Strip." (http://www.imemc.org/index.php?obj_id=53&story_id=57097) While quoting this IMEMC article, Wikipedia blames the closure was due to "repeated violations and coercion by Qatar-based station Al-Jazeera." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ramattan) IMEMC says that, this time, Ramattan had not been able to pay the Internal Security Forces of Hamas to prevent an attack because of its financial crisis. Several media outlets, including Al Jazeera, "were supposed to pay Ramattan for using its equipment, facilities and personnel during the war on Gaza as Israel prevented foreign journalists from entering the coastal region."

[19] Other web documentaries on Israel-Palestines include *Points of View* (2014), an Israeli-produced i-doc funded by B'Tselem, the 'Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories.' Its short pieces on daily life under occupation produced by Palestinian youth through B'Tselem's Camera Distribution Project can be viewed by clicking on a map of Israel-Palestine. *Broken Hopes—Oslo's Legacy* (2013) is a French/European production by Action Against Hunger but involved the Israeli group "Breaking the Silence"—ex-soldiers critical of the Israeli government. An interactive map through the West Bank opens to information links and testimonies by Palestinians in particular, documenting the splintering of the territory and the restrictions on life in occupied Palestine.

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“Video project highlights life on the border,” “The World” with host Lisa Mullins, and reporter, Carol Zall. PRI (Public Radio International). December 30, 2008. Web. http://www.pri.org/node/8047/popout (audio transcript)

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Producing revolutionary history on film: Henri Lefebvre's urban space and Peter Watkins' *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*

by Hamish Ford

Visual essay: the Paris Commune on film



Following extensive on-screen text introducing viewers to the Paris Commune and its historical context, assuming little or no knowledge thereof (in reflection of this event's relative obscurity in France and much of the world), the first moving image we see in Peter Watkins' film *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is an extremely self-reflexive one. Including some key actors and even the film's director with his crew, what will become a 6-minute hand-held travelling shot snakes through a single, subdivided set.



In reality, the set is an outer Paris warehouse, within which can be seen a large TV studio-style lighting rig and other filmmaking materials. This space is presented by the off-screen voices of actors who played 'Commune TV' reporters in the film as post-dating both the Commune's bloody end and the *La Commune* shoot itself.





The film's first hour establishes *La Commune*'s very particular mix of performative modes, most prominently via the direct-to-camera address of the pro-revolutionary "Commune TV" reporters and their various *vox populi*-style interviews carried out within a very loosely recreated working-class 11th Paris *arrondissement*, and select other locales.

Equally important are lengthier discussion-based scenes featuring ordinary citizens of the Commune, or more precisely the largely non-professional actors playing them, increasingly referencing the present tense of the film's own production, asking what can be learnt from the Commune's history through the combined experience of collaboratively educating themselves about it and making the film.





As the Commune reaches its violent end, more and more working-class Parisians take up arms and build barracades in its defence from the increasing military assault by national government forces, including the many women portrayed by the film as together playing a crucial role within this short experiment in radical politics.

During the chaotic final days, frequently armed Communards also become increasingly impatient with the TV reporter, questioning even such favourable media's power, and asking why he doesn't fight to save a political project he claims to support.





While the final assault on Paris is rendered by the film through evocative images but without explicit violence, the summary

Meanwhile government leader Adolphe Thiers addresses the National Assembly at Versailles to announce the army's

executions of up to 30,000 men, women, and children by troops under direct order of the national government are given extensive discussion via both on-screen text and by actor-participants speaking in the present tense.	successful military destruction of the Commune, with his words sometimes accompanied by images of Communards being rounded up, complimenting the army of restoring "humanity" and "civilization" before emphasizing the need for the enemy to be "legally but unrelentingly" punished. Ringing in viewers' eyes, ears, and minds is both the atrocity of what became known as *semaine sanglante* ('bloody week') and its immediate historic ramifications in France, Europe and beyond, but also comparative statistics cited via text screens suggesting that fundamental inequalities over which the Commune was largely fought are today more extreme than ever.

Introduction: producing revolutionary history on film

> "What would remain of the Church if there were no churches?...[A] revolution that does not produce a new space has not realised its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses."
> —Henri Lefebvre[1] [open notes in new window]

> "In such a world as this, what happened in Paris in the spring of 1871 represented (and still represents) the idea of commitment to a struggle for a better world... The notion of a film showing this commitment was thus born."
> —Peter Watkins[2]

> "What the media are particularly afraid of is to see the man in the little rectangle replaced by a multitude of people, the public."
> —*La Commune (Paris, 1871)*[3]

In this article I write about the political, conceptual, and filmic staging of revolutionary history as a consistently energizing force invoking past, present, and future, with a focus on how such a process plays out within urban space in response to recent history and my chosen filmic case study. I begin by setting up the theoretical context by way of Henri Lefebvre's pioneering work, starting with his particular account of modernity's philosophical tensions, before drawing on more recent scholarship on the potential revolutionary reappropriation of the city and responding to global events of the last five years. I then go on to examine in detail *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, a collaborative, nearly six-hour film directed by Peter Watkins in 2000, which deals with the historical and ongoing relevance of an important yet often shrouded urban uprising and brief experiment in revolutionary democracy spanning March-May 1871 known as the *Commune de Paris* or "Paris Commune."[4] This film's remarkable sound-images, I argue, play out across a mix of historical frames concurrently material, mythic, theatrical, and multiply reflexive in their presentation of space and time.

Seen through *La Commune*'s prism, with its special form of time travelling, revolutionary thought and action have an increasingly trans-historical impetus in both force and meaning. *La Commune* allows us to perceive history as a "palimpsest." By this I mean that here is a text of film-history invoking and frequently confusing the loose narrative's particular period setting and associated historical context on the one hand, and the reflexively marked textual layers and aesthetic filmmaking aspects of the work's own production period on the other, with some intervening historical details also thrown into the mix. The

viewer then adds further customized layers to this already palimpsestic work, borne of her particular historical and spectatorial situation, plus any additional knowledge of developments since the film's completion and limited reception. She thereby sees, or senses, through the historical layers concurrently, undermining any simple linearity. Such multi-temporality is implicitly present when watching any film. However, it is absolutely central to *La Commune*'s basic internal operation, and even viability.

The film privileges a centrally collaborative mode of performance. This pertains both to the project's 220 on-screen participants—largely non-professional actors who together researched and work-shopped the Commune, then largely improvised their dialogue during the shoot—but also the precise audiovisual form through which this process is rendered by the film itself, and the highly participatory relationship subsequently engendered with spectators. In this way, it provides the sound-image record of a very particular filmmaking and educational process driven by autodidactic learning, both group-based and individual, on screen and off, and the collaborative and from the start inherently self-conscious "performance" of a rather suppressed history. If *La Commune* can be characterized as offering a unique example of reflexive political cinema, however, it also only really comes alive with customized viewer collaboration.

La Commune constitutes a complex fusion of cinema and history that is perennially seductive, a film forever both real and fantastical in its resonance for our still-new 21st Century. At the same time, we are reminded—by the film, subsequent history, and our own spectatorial moment therein—that viable revolutionary change constantly threatens to slip away in the face of seemingly immovable state opposition and private capital's corporate interests, ultimately backed by military force—no matter what historical context we emphasise. The film also gives multiple voice to a very real wavering human belief not only in revolution's very possibility but also its precise desirability and how we as individuals would likely act in the event of its occurrence. Such an experience chimes very much with what Henri Lefebvre saw as two ultimately irreconcilable energies driving 20th Century modernity, the impacts of which we continue to experience in the first two decades of the next. On the one hand, there is a radical critique of the social and political status quo that calls our urgent attention, driven by hope in the possibility of building a better future. Lefebvre suggests that such a critique is associated with the long shadow of Karl Marx's still—and we could today say newly rejuvenated—trenchant analyses of the inherent inequities and ethical regressions of everyday life as lived within ever more extreme capitalist systems. On the other hand, we experience a seemingly contrary energy, that of an intimate, perhaps inescapable shattering of belief, which concurrently both enables and undermines the modern world's very possibility. This kind of critique emanates from a discourse strongly indebted to Friedrich Nietzsche.[5]

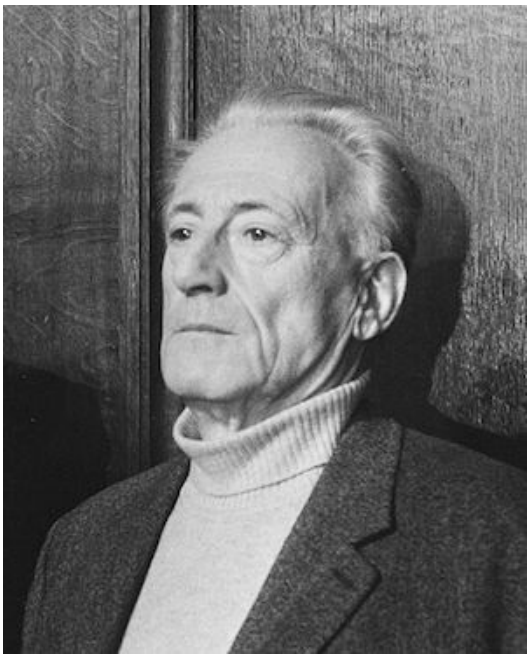
The article is divided into two parts, each with smaller sections for ease of reading navigation. Part I presents Lefebvre's particular account of modernity's irreconcilable character as it informs his increasingly prescient analysis of urban space and revolutionary possibility, which I follow with an updated discussion of these topics as they play out in the real world over recent years. Accompanied by select images, Part I thereby sets the theoretical and historical scene for Part II, which begins by introducing the story of the Paris Commune followed by its most substantive cinematic treatment, *La Commune (Paris 1871)*. The remainder of the article comprises a sustained cinematic analysis of the film, accompanied by 60 stills, tracing how this remarkable, multiply-collaborative work presents, analyses, and provokes anew the above themes and ongoing questions.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Henri Lefebvre

Part I.
Updating Lefebvre and the city

Henri Lefebvre's irreconcilable modernity

Henri Lefebvre was a French Marxist philosopher whose diverse and voluminous work spanned the 1920s up to his death in 1991. Lefebvre had a substantial influence within France, due in part but not limited to being the most high profile intellectual closely associated with the *Parti communiste français* (PCF, or French Communist Party). From 1928 to 1958 he was a member of the Party but was also an internal and subsequently external critic thereof.[6] [open notes in new window] Upon its eventual but very partial translation, his work has been selectively important for Anglophone scholarship in the areas of sociology, architecture, geography, urban studies, and literary criticism. Such disciplinary incorporations are rather at odds with the multiple interests addressed within even a single text by Lefebvre, not to mention his work's consistent critique of academic specialization. In addition to the above subject areas, a single article or book by this writer offers discussions of political science, philosophy, avant-garde art, and more. When English translations of his writing gradually began to appear in the 1960s and 70s, cross-disciplinary research and overall philosophical discussion of such diverse fields was often looked down on within the traditional Anglophone scholarly world. Meanwhile, within the context of 1960s and 70s then-extensive radical Marxist academic culture itself, Lefebvre's work was also often ignored or dismissed as representing a humanist, Hegelian Marxism decidedly out of vogue—as opposed to the structuralism of Louis Althusser and Roland Barthes, the favoured models for rigorous "updated" Marxist theory.[7] Suffice to say, poststructuralist theorists found little use for his work either. The result was that during his lifetime, Lefebvre was never as well known or fashionable in the Anglophone world as other prominent post-war French intellectuals.[8]

The year of Lefebvre's death saw the emergence of two translations that would see an important if still rather selective upsurge in his work's impact on English-language scholarship: the first volume of *Critique of Everyday Life* (originally published in French as *Critique de la vie Quotidienne*, 1947) and *The Production of Space* (originally *La Production de l'Espace*, 1974). Upon complete eventual translation the *Critique of Everyday Life* trilogy (the second and third French-language volumes originally published in 1961 and 1981 respectively) have perhaps had most impact on sociology and more politically engaged cultural studies, while *The Production of Space* has had substantial influence within urban studies, architecture, and geography, as well as some of the humanities. Nonetheless, despite Lefebvre's relative posthumous salience, Stanley Aronowitz suggests that the decidedly late and piecemeal Anglophone engagement with his work remains "a classic case of mis-recognition" for being a determinedly separate, discipline-bound understanding of a philosophical writer whose treatment of a variety of subjects "transgressed the disciplines, especially the relation of philosophy to

the social sciences and art."[9]

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre's various philosophical, historical, cultural, and overarching political interests coalesce around the central figure of urban space. "The overriding theme" of this magisterial book, writes Aronowitz before quoting from it,

> "is Lefebvre's contention that space is not an ether, a container that has the force of nature. The idea that space is pre-given is vehemently denied. Space is social as well as a property of the natural world but in the slow course of historical (capitalist) development, 'everything in terrestrial space has been explored and nearly everything has been occupied and conquered.'"[10]

Such a cross-disciplinary study of space, with sustained attention given to cities, would appear highly relevant to academic film studies. Yet although we have seen significant film scholarship on the close relation between cinema and the modern city for many years now, and most extensively within cinema history itself, *The Production of Space* and Lefebvre's other writing on space —both urban and rural—has on the whole enjoyed surprisingly little sustained application.[11]

Pulling together Lefebvre's extensive thinking and writing about the city going back at least to the first volume of *Critique of Everyday Life* (written immediately after World War Two), *The Production of Space* offers a sustained overview of the transformation of space in the 20th Century throughout France and Europe, essaying its conceptual and philosophical as well as political and social ramifications and complexities. While the book has had some real influence within various academic disciplines, Lefebvre's big-picture address can easily bypass such selective appropriation. Its philosophical starting point is the description of modernity as characterized by the irreconcilable twin narratives provided by Marx and Nietzsche. This amounts, he writes, to a "historicity driven forward by the forces of productive… revolutionary rationality"—the Marxist legacy—butting up against "the cyclical, repetitious space-time of death and life"—the Nietzschean element. Highlighting the stark opposition, Lefebvre continues:

> "Nietzschean time, as theatre of universal tragedy, as the cyclical, repetitious space-time of death and life, has nothing in common with Marxist time—that is, historicity driven forward by the forces of productive and adequately (to be optimistic) oriented by industrial, proletarian and revolutionary rationality."[12]

Both in Lefebvre's work and arguably within Western intellectual and political culture itself, this irresolvable tension would never become a new "thesis" by which to achieve further progress (in this sense having more in common with Theodor Adorno's "negative dialectic" than more traditional "Hegelian" dialectical models[13]). In Part II ahead, I will explore the notion that a viable sense of revolutionary possibility may, while never overlooking such apparent irreconcilability as described by Lefebvre, be kept uniquely alive within the quintessentially modern and "virtual" form of the cinema as forever attuned to and engaged with the multi-layered currents of real, ongoing history—a modern history inevitably itself fundamentally affected by and refigured through 120 years of audiovisual culture. In our times enjoying renewed "real world" investments and connections, revolution both on screen and beyond can be seen afresh as a forever-returning motivating dream, yet as handed down by the perennially doubt-inducing moving sound-image—be it a "film" such as *La Commune* or today's 24-hour television and diverse online coverage of global events. This is a dream, I argue, with which it is

difficult to confidently assert our own individual relationship and possible role within.

Lefebvre himself was mindful of how revolutionary change and the militarized capitalist state that resists it both participate in the fundamental shattering of belief so central to the political and cultural dimensions of Western modernity. While most clearly a Marxist, here lies the less obvious importance of Nietzsche's crucial legacy to Lefebvre seen as a modern philosopher. If ultimately irreconcilable, these two 19th Century philosophers' work provides the crucial background for the account of power and its resistance found in Lefebvre's writing. He states in *The Production of Space*,

> "the violence of power is answered by the violence of subversion. With its wars and revolutions, defeats and victories, confrontation and turbulence, the modern world corresponds precisely to Nietzsche's tragic vision."[14]

Completing a key passage, Lefebvre goes on to apply this Nietzschean figuration in predicting revolutionary uprising as the inevitable correlative of state oppression:

> "State-imposed normality makes permanent transgression inevitable. As for time and negativity, whenever they re-emerge, as they must, they do so explosively. This is a new negativity, a tragic negativity which manifests itself as incessant violence. These seething forces are still capable of rattling the lid of the cauldron of the state and its space, for differences can never be totally quieted. Though defeated, they live on, and from time to time they begin fighting ferociously to reassert themselves and transform themselves through struggle."[15]

Such writing—the tenor and language of which again gets close on the surface at least to more globally influential work by Lefebvre's infamously "pessimistic" German near-contemporary, Adorno[16]—sets the philosophical scene by crystallizing his work's particular relevance to my topic and concerns. Just as violent, oppressive political forces, both national and transnational, brought about an earlier "rattling [of] the lid of the cauldron of the state and its space" in the case of the Paris Commune, as I will go on to address, we can see important connections to events over recent years in our global cities, and even through recent electoral politics. As I will argue in Part II, *La Commune* demonstrates cinema's unique ability to provoke such trans-historical connections with uncommon force.

Reappropriating the city, revolution's impossible ground

Since 2010, the interconnected fields of urban-based and online discourse around the theme of revolution have returned to prominent mainstream attention with striking international impact, albeit often via superficial mass- or social-media narration. There remains, of course, understandable scepticism about what "revolution" means in an era when state-enforced capitalism dominates the ideological position of all large political parties and media outlets in the West, especially when the same institutional discourses sometimes claim to condone it—only in non- or "anti"-Western countries, of course. Nevertheless, and no matter how unlikely it seemed a decade or so ago, recent events spanning the United States, Europe, the Middle East, and beyond, have featured urban space as a prominent site for the staging and performance of diverse but at least in part genuine revolutionary fervor. In

country after country, major urban centers have been host to public expressions of disgust at a national and global status quo.



Protesters occupying Tahrir Square in central Cairo, January 2011.

Cairo's Tahrir Square became the totemic site invoking a revolutionary mood in the Middle East and North Africa soon dubbed the 'Arab Spring' by Western media, particularly when 18 days into their January 2011 occupation of the square Egyptian protesters were successful in demanding that Hosni Mubarak – the dictator who had ruled Egypt with US support for 30 years – finally relinquish power. Urban-based revolutionary activity erupting in the West later the same year had a more explicitly socioeconomic focus. Inspired by recent anti-austerity activism in Spain, the self-named 'Occupy Wall St.' protests began in New York City's Zuccotti Park during September 2011 before spreading to other major US cities and beyond. These sizable demonstrations focused on escalating inequality resulting from mainstream political parties' long collusion with global capital and ongoing imperial militarism. With more than half the world's people now living in big cities, it is not surprising that such disquiet would be expressed within nations' symbolic, political, economic, and increasingly demographic centers. In the process we have witnessed an escalation of sporadic attempts at reappropriating urban space itself.



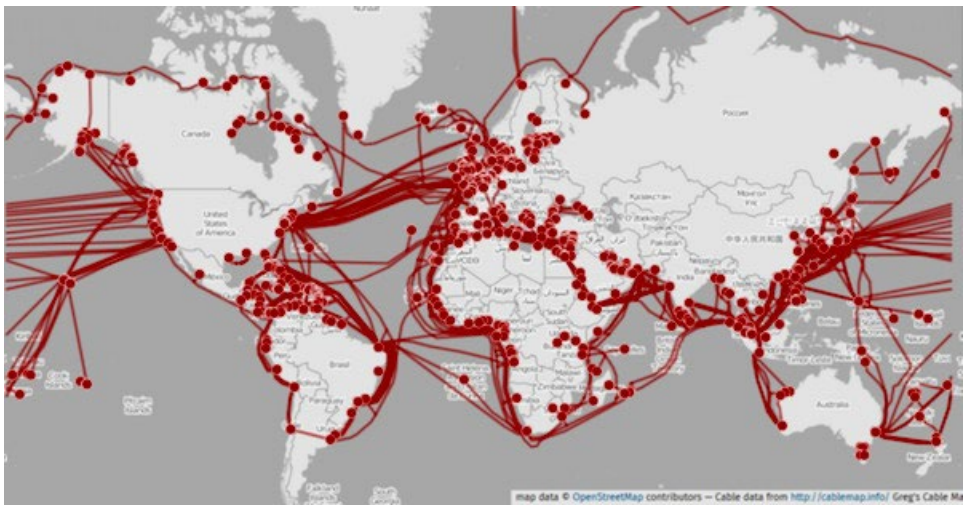
'Occupy Wall St.' protesters in Zuccotti Park, New York City, September 2011.

If the shape and political identity of any would-be revolutionary change over the last half decade is now less clear than ever, urban spaces provide a necessary real-world stage, with online social networking and media—both "alternative" and corporate—the necessary "virtual" agent. Yet these spaces are increasingly disconnected from the city's more centralized pre-21st Century incarnations. With their radically expanded dimensions, major cities have become so spatially and demographically reconfigured that the current population's experience—notably for a vast majority living far from the traditional center—has little connection to the experimental and romantic-modernist cultural heritage of city life in earlier periods. This heritage was famously extolled and encapsulated by writers like Walter Benjamin in the 1920s and '30s and before him, most important of all, Charles Baudelaire in the 19th Century.



Paris in the 1860s, here Boulevard de Strasbourg and Porte Saint-Martin after Georges-Eugène Haussmann's rebuilding of the city into one featuring avenues and light.

Today, experience of the city is increasingly disconnected and dispersed, stemming from the economic realty that most people now can't even conceive of living in historic, often gentrified inner regions, and may never visit such spaces. At the same time, our diverse experience of urban culture becomes exponentially globally networked via different online mechanisms, which have become an increasingly important 'virtual' space transcending centre-periphery models of space and communications.



A map of the world showing primary Internet hubs.

Many occupants of today's metropolises, especially in the non-Western world, work in big cities by necessity more than by choice, and they are decidedly non-permanent inhabitants thereof when it comes to official status and basic living situation. This has often been the case throughout history, escalating sharply as national economies became decreasingly agrarian-



Indian migrant workers resting between shifts on rented cots in New Delhi (metro population 22 million), 19 December 2011.



São Paulo (municipal population 12 million, metro population 21 million).



London's central financial district, known tellingly as 'the City'.

based. Nevertheless, the city is today a very different beast when it comes to sheer size, design, and functionality, compared to even two or three decades ago. For basic demographic, technological, socioeconomic, and political reasons, the city increasingly holds the key to any possible revolutionary change. This is both despite and due to the fact that most of the 20th Century's major revolutions were historically non-urban in origin,[17] often for the very same reasons that present day city-based radical movements face apparently immutable opposition. More than ever, exponentially fused state and capital power, which has operated increasingly free of traditional political regulation, permanently occupies and "owns" the heart of our major globalized cities. As the world's broad urban population continues to explode, the more potential pressure such a huge mass of humanity can potentially apply when it comes to "reclaiming" the reality they live or work within, and often build.

In Lefebvre's terms, such a "reclaiming" is expressed through his famous, resonant phrase: the "right to the city." Such an idea and possible movement, he suggests,

> "cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed right to urban life."[18]

Strongly influenced by Lefebvre's work and very responsible for his Anglophone reception as an urban studies theorist, influential British Marxist David Harvey has long been interested in the transforming nature of cities and their potential for revolutionary "reclaiming." In *Rebel Cities* (2013), Harvey writes that while the city's fabled centrality

> "has been destroyed... there is an impulse towards and longing for its restoration which arises again and again to produce far-reaching political effects, as we have recently seen in the central squares of Cairo, Madrid, Athens, Barcelona, and even Madison, Wisconsin and now Zuccotti Park in New York City."[19]

In the three years since Harvey's book, things have changed once again, reminding us of the absolute precariousness of any revolutionary potential. Zuccotti Park has been silent since being cleared of protesters by police, starting in mid-November 2011 and into early 2012. In early 2016, however, it was home to a 'phone bank' for Bernie Sanders' bid for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, his supporters seeking to cop-opt the 'revolutionary' aura of four years earlier for what in the US context amounts to a very unusual 'socialist' insurgency inside the USA's notoriously right-wing two-party system, a campaign the success of which for a long time defied all conventional wisdom.

But while cities can perhaps be, for a short period at least, sites of potential revolutionary unrest, such episodes remind us that their daily role is to be home base for state capitalism's political and "security" power, as we saw with the eventual police eviction ordered by city officials of many "Occupy" sites in the United States and elsewhere. Revolutionary potential is always a fragile and ambiguous affair that breathes only so long as the city's real bosses' tolerance holds out.[20] Nonetheless, and explicitly following Lefebvre, Harvey suggests that despite yet also due to the apparent ongoing immutability of global cities as home to state capitalism's power, in whatever



Bernie Sanders phone banking and rally at Zuccotti Park, March 2016.



'Occupy Melbourne' protest broken up by police, 21 October 2011.



Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras declares victory at the January 2015 Greek elections, seen here hailing supporters in central Athens. Syriza was re-elected in 2015, with Tsipras continuing as Prime Minister.

form it may take in a given context, the epicenter of potential revolutionary change is increasingly urban space.[21]

In many respects the results of the "Arab Spring" and "Occupy" movements Harvey and many other more famous leftist writers (such as Noam Chomsky and Slavoj Zizek) have gestured toward and loosely supported are far from clear. When it comes to the activism itself, within Anglophone countries there has been a clear dissipation since 2013. However, in south continental Europe things are rather different. Here prominent activism continues, driven by the ongoing impact of extreme "austerity measures" inflicted upon majority populations by national governments seeking to curry favor with Europe's real economic and political masters immediately to the north, in an extreme anti-Keynesian response to the global financial crisis that began in 2008. In addition, important flow-on effects can be charted between this significant ongoing activism—frequently urban-based and, while quite diverse, most prominently displaying a leftist orientation—and electoral politics itself. Parties and groupings unambiguously more radical in their agenda than Europe's traditional center-left "social democratic" parties have had unprecedented recent successes in major opinion polls and increasingly now in national elections. The first sign of this development occurred in Greece. Following early 2015 Greek elections, the left-wing grouping called Syriza formed a national coalition government. This unprecedented victory for such an avowedly leftist force, outflanking the formerly major center-left PASOK party in regards to both policy and overwhelming electoral support, was directly due to Syriza's unambiguous critique of austerity measures demanded by the "Troika" (the European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund) that had caused such large-scale deprivation for much of the population over recent years. Sustained activism against previous Greek governments enforcing such a program played out very prominently on the streets of central Athens and other major cities. Following the continuation of these EU bailout programs by Syriza itself upon being elected (resulting from decidedly unequal negotiations with Troika representatives and the German Government), in late 2015 such activism escalated again.[22]

In Spain, for much of 2014 and 2015 opinion polls suggested the country could be on track to vote in its own radical—in this case anarchist-inflected—leftist government led by the Podemos party at late 2015 elections, following real success at European Parliament and municipal levels. Podemos did not pull off the spectacular victory in December that its more hopeful supporters thought possible (despite fluctuating polls), with the governing conservative People's Party (PP) receiving the most votes but not enough to form government. Even so, for a party with unambiguous activist origins less than two years old, the result—gaining 20% of the vote (nearly as much as the mainstream centre-left PSOE party)—was significant. A second national election in June 2016 again resulted in no clear winner—despite the PP increasing its support overall, while the PSOE stagnated. Despite Podemos having successfully presented itself as the main left opposition party for much of the six months leading up to the second election (helped by the PSOE undergoing internal crises) while the country remained at a political deadlock, and now part of a larger left-wing alliance (including communist elements) called Unidos Podemos, it again received fewer votes than expected (21%, barely an advance from 2015). Perhaps in light of the thus-far failed

Syriza experiment leftist Spanish voters, and especially the urban activists who in many respects initially fuelled the early success of these new political organizations, lost faith that even proclaimed anti-austerity parties are capable of reversing policy course—irrespective of whether their intentions are genuine—such is the fundamentally undemocratic reality of the Eurozone.[23] As of September 2016, again no grouping appears capable of forming a stable governing coalition, and a third Spanish election in quick succession remains quite possible.

In neighbouring Portugal, at October 2015 national elections both new and older leftist parties together won the majority of votes, only for the country's conservative President to instead invite minority right-wing parties to form a government, prompting much national and global outcry. A month later this new right-wing government was defeated on the floor of the parliament in a no-confidence motion by the majority left-wing members, following which the latter announced a new governing coalition estimated by one conservative news source to be far more radical and anti-austerity than Syriza ever was.[24] The much debated success of Syriza in Greece, a new and more avowedly anti-austerity government in Portugal, and the possibility of a significant role for Podemos in Spain, together make for a common story of political movements with strong activist and radical-left roots going from electoral non-existence or irrelevance to parties enjoying the highest or second total level of support in the country within less than a few years.[25] In all three cases featuring youthful leadership with prominent activist histories, these parties' escalating popularity has been built directly on the initial, sustained rejection of the Troika-mandated "solutions" to the global financial crisis by long-term protest action starting and often continuing in its most visible form through the extensive occupation of public spaces across southern Europe's major cities and beyond.[26]



A "March for Change" filling Plaza de Sol in central Madrid, organised by Podemos, 31 January 2015.

Challenging space, history that hurts

Writing in the early 1970s of the enormous challenges facing what he calls the production of space in any kind of potential revolutionary sense, Lefebvre states that up to now the West

> "has generalized and globalized violence. Space as locus of production, as itself product and production, is both the weapon and the sign of the struggle. If it is to be carried through to the end —there is in any case no way of turning back—this gigantic task now calls for the immediate production or creation of something other than nature: a second, different or new nature, so to speak. This means the production of space, urban space, both as product and as a work, in the sense in which art created works. If this project fails, the failure will be total, and the consequences of that are impossible to foresee."[27]

Escalating with his own move to Paris in the mid 1950s (to take up an academic appointment) and a close but testy relationship with the Situationist International, Lefebvre's work increased in its focus on the city as a key potential site of the revolutionary reappropriation and production of space.[28] This updated Marxist focus on the city, Harvey writes, put Lefebvre at odds with

> "conventional Marxist thinking, which had never accorded the urban much significance in revolutionary strategy, even though it mythologized the Paris Commune as a central event in its history."[29]

Harvey explains that especially in light of Lefebvre's own study of the Paris Commune, *La Proclamation de la Commune*, published in 1965 (not yet translated into English)—which in certain respects closely echoed the Situationists' March 1962 text, "Theses on the Commune" (leading them to accuse Lefebvre of plagiarism, resulting in a dramatic falling out)—he knew

> "that revolutionary movements frequently if not always assume an urban dimension. This immediately put him at odds with the Communist Party leadership, which maintained that the factory-based proletariat, who lived and worked in rural or banlieue areas, remained the vanguard force for revolutionary change."[30]

Bill Brown, long-time author of self-described "Situationist inspired" U.S. journal *NOT BORED!*, argues that as a Marxist focusing on the city, Lefebvre was actually breaking new ground, and that there was "very little in Karl Marx's works—even in the later, 'mature' writings—from which to offer a properly Marxist critique of the city."[31] Suggesting Lefebvre effectively "borrowed" the Situationists' critique to update Marxist thinking about urban space,[32] Brown goes on to quote from Lefebvre's *Le Droit à la Ville* (Right to the City), written during 1967 to mark the centenary of Marx's *Das Kapital*:

> "Marx did not show (and in his time he could not) that urbanization and the urban contain the meaning of industrialization. He did not see that industrial production implied the urbanization of society, and that the mastery of industrial potentials required specific knowledge concerning urbanization. Industrial production, after a certain growth, produces urbanization, providing it with conditions, and possibilities. The problematic is displaced and becomes that of urban development. The works of Marx (notably *Capital*) contained precious indications on the city and particularly on the historical relations between town and country. They do not pose the urban problem. In Marx's time, only the housing problem was raised and studied by Engels. Now, the problem of the city is immensely greater than that of housing."[33]



Migrant laborers on a demolished residential site in central Shanghai, with the new metropolis seen gleaming in the background (municipal population 24 million, metro population approximately 40 million), 5 September 2012.

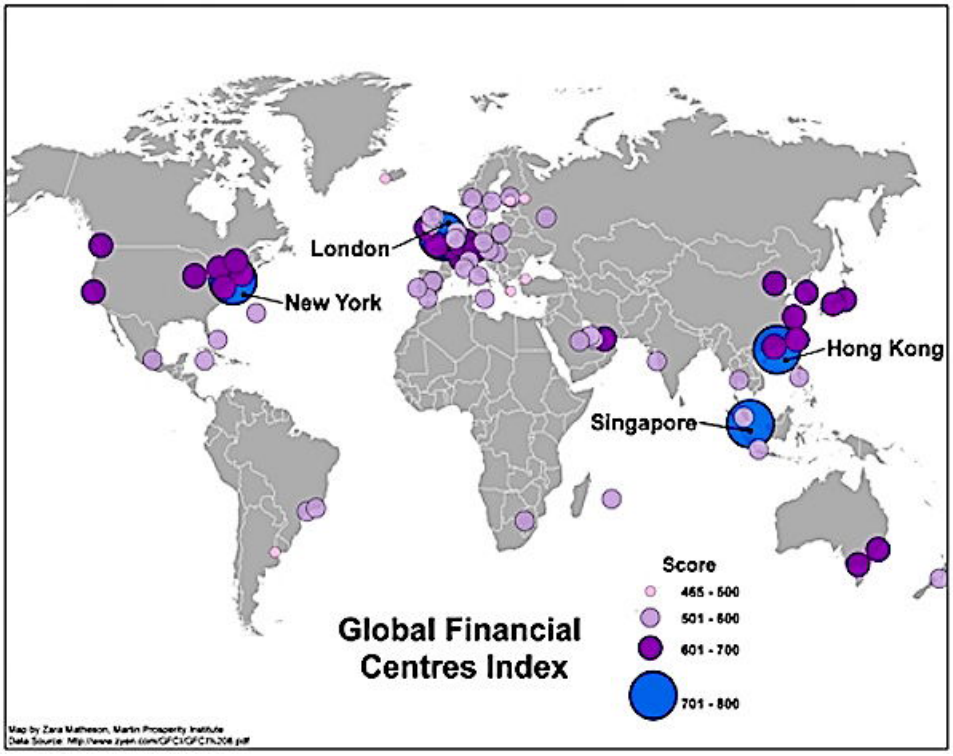
While Lefebvre may have been at odds with some prominent intellectual and institutionalized Marxism of the time, his work on cities has enjoyed gradually increasing, if still rather corralled and selective, impact outside France. Even so, and despite all the evidence of recent years, Harvey maintains,

> "it is still the case that much of the traditional left has had trouble grappling with the revolutionary potential of urban social movements."[34]

In light of recent global events and their political ramifications both in the activist and party-political electoral contexts I have described above, in addition to basic demographic and labor force facts, we can see how Lefebvre's focus on the city was indeed prescient. As Harvey writes,

> "In much of the advanced capitalist world, the important and ever-expanding labour of making and sustaining urban life is increasingly done by insecure, often part-time and disorganized low-paid labour. The so-called 'precariat' has replaced the 'proletariat'. ...The fading of the urban-rural divide has proceeded at a different pace throughout the world, but there is no question that it has taken the direction Lefebvre predicted. ... The mass of humanity is increasingly being absorbed within the ferments and cross-currents of urbanized life.[35]

This mass urban workforce exists across both Western cities, with increasing migrant populations from the "developing," often former colonial world, and within the much larger metropolises of India and China. With an increasingly global flow of capital and outsourced employment, the common factor among workers is often less a question of what nation-state they live in and more whether they reside in large cities networked via capital's most powerful hubs. These financial hubs remain largely, though not entirely, in the West, with the East coast of China (the heart of which remains Hong Kong) increasingly important. The working class in Western capital cities is then exponentially made to "compete" with this vast, more poorly paid, global urban workforce.



A map showing the world's key financial activity hotspots.

The uniqueness and relevance of Lefebvre's work in this area, taking in its political and more philosophical dimensions (always interconnected), is made especially clear when we consider the traditional privileging of time found in prominent "modernist" accounts of history and the advent of modernity. In a discussion of Fredric Jameson's work, for example, media theorist Alexander Galloway argues that thinkers such as Jameson (an influential theorist of modernity and critic of postmodernity with an audience far larger than his Marxism would initially suggest) often emphasize temporality and the pre-eminence of history per se as "classic modern categories" that can be charted from the Enlightenment tradition of Kant through to Marx and beyond.[36] Against this longstanding tendency, three or four decades ago much influential Humanities scholarship in Anglophone countries shifted the focus onto space, in a move often associated with the advent of "postmodernism" as a historical and analytical-theoretical development. Within film studies, while academic culture in some regions during the 1980s and 90s embraced the debatable tenets of postmodernism more than some others, our new century has seen a gradual but definite re-focusing of work around temporality in large part due to Deleuze's two cinema books, *Cinema 1:The Movement-Image* and especially *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, and—to a large degree thanks to Deleuze—the resurgent influence of Henri Bergson's philosophy.[37] Like Peter Watkins (as I will discuss), Lefebvre fits into exactly none of these academic flows. A deeply but not at all naively utopian thinker whose work displays precisely no postmodern aspects, his emphasis on space also sits at odds with much Marxism and modernism—the political, cultural, and philosophical traditions with which he is otherwise most properly connected.

While Lefebvre's explicit focus remains space, as a Marxist, "history" far from disappears in his work, both in its temporal and material senses. In fact, what Galloway calls "the punchiest line"[38] from Jameson's 1981 book, *The Political Unconscious,* applies equally to Lefebvre, the Paris Commune, and *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, for properly articulating the conflation of temporal and spatial violence: "History is what hurts.'"[39] Galloway writes of

Jameson's "evocative expression" that it means

> "two things at once. First, when history is reified or mystified it sets real limits on individual or collective practice. Yet at the same time history is the badge people wear designating the struggle or hurt endured."[40]

One very particular event in the West's modern story that exemplifies such a multi-dimensional understanding of history is the Paris Commune.[41] Here history "hurts" first of all in the form of the Communards' own internal and external struggles, both ideological and military, throughout the Commune's very short life. And its protagonists certainly "hurt" as a result of a military siege and in the vicious reprisals accompanying its violent cessation at the hands of firing squads or through incarceration.

Official, often state-sanctioned history in France and elsewhere, defined as so often in the West in terms of heroic individual men's actions, comprises the "reified or mystified" version of past events comprising the narrative of nationalism. Such narratives necessarily evict a literally collective and local yet also decidedly internationalist experiment and experience as the Paris Commune, an exemplary victim of such definitions of history. Surviving Communards and later sympathizers thus wore their own alternative version of history in the form of a mournful and in some ways romanticized "badge" marking the ongoing hurt of a history excised by its official winners. The Communards sought to remind France and the world what really happened, and somehow tried to give the Commune's central ideas some ongoing life. In her recent book tracing the Commune's motivating principles and their various subsequent destinations via key figures, Kristin Ross evokes the Commune's radical implications—then as now—by way of a resonant term: "decentralizing the flow of history."[42] Scrawled on a wall at the end of *Novyy Vavilon/The New Babylon* (Grigori Kozintsev & Leonid Trauberg, USSR, 1929), the late-silent Soviet film dramatizing the events of the Commune, is a famous and simple yet properly palimpsest-like phrase: "Vive la Commune!" In both *New Babylon* and *La Commune* these totemic words are also mouthed by men and women on screen—shouted melodramatically, or muttered quietly—awaiting their likely executions.



A still from the end of *Novyy Vavilon/The New Babylon* (Grigori Kozintsev & Leonid Trauberg, USSR, 1929).

Re-engaging with the Paris Commune offers us a singularly instructive case study through which to prompt, exhibit, essay, and critique Lefebvre's idea of the production of space in a would-be revolutionary context—its tantalizing possibility and inherent, perhaps intractable problems. The most immediate, complex, and updated means of doing this, I propose, is to focus on the performative audiovisual rendering of such a "history that hurts" as especially alive in time-travelling, palimpsestic form throughout *La Commune*'s truly expansive, reflexive, yet also strikingly intimate cinematic treatment.

Part II.
La Commune (Paris, 1871)

The Paris Commune—
a totemic, shrouded, impossible event

The Paris Commune is hugely important in the history of revolutionary politics, and has at times been invoked in relation to the recent urban-based uprisings that I discussed in Part I. Yet the story of "the Commune"—shorthand for the revolutionary uprising and subsequently elected radical left-wing administration than ran Paris from 18 March to 28 May of 1871 in defiance of the national government, and the activities of its diverse supporters—remains perhaps not especially familiar to many present-day readers. Therefore, I will begin Part II by summarizing this shrouded history, including crucial prior and subsequent events, before introducing the director of its most substantial cinematic treatment, Peter Watkins, then *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* itself. The remainder of the article offers a sustained account of and response to this unique film in light of the historical and theoretical discussion so far.[43]

Between September 1870 and January 1871 Paris was under siege by German military forces, the drawn-out finale to the Franco-Prussian War. The siege's deprivations escalated a sharp distinction in France between Paris and other major cities on the one hand, and much more conservative, largely Catholic rural areas on the other. Characterized in its numerous working-class *arrondissements* (districts) by a combination of increasing left-wing ferment, progressive republicanism, and resistance to the threat of occupation, the French capital was defended throughout the siege by the nearly 300,000-strong forces of the National Guard, rather than the official French Army. Life in Paris was extremely tough with severe shortages of food, firewood, coal, and medicine during a very cold winter, with populations in the many poorer areas resorting to eating rats. The city was virtually cut off from the outside world. With poverty skyrocketing and a 100% increase in the mortality rate during the siege, many of the increasingly jobless population joined the National Guard, earning daily wages that could buy "a lettuce or a dog's brain," as viewers of *La Commune* are told via one of its numerous white-on-black text screens.[44] The Guard would soon go on to constitute the Commune's core military defense and play a significant role in its politics.

Bitterly opposed to the newly elected and now largely monarchist National Assembly (France's parliament), the National Guard had its own democratic structure as a federation of elected delegates. The organization's primary aim, *La Commune* informs us, was two-fold:

> "To defend the Republic against a Prussian invasion or a Monarchist Restoration."

On 26 February 1871 Chief Executive of the national government, Adolphe Thiers (a conservative Republican, rather than Monarchist), signed the Treaty of Versailles with Prussia's Otto von Bismarck, which stripped France of territory, imposed onerous compensation obligations, and paved the way for German troops to enter Paris. Thiers soon became increasingly concerned at the National Guard's growing ties with revolutionary political forces in the capital. His fears were confirmed when on 15 March the Guard elected a

> "Central Committee, rejecting all Government authority… More than just a military force, it becomes a political power serving a revolutionary ideal."

Everyday life was becoming increasingly dire as a result of the very high unemployment rate and serious effects of the siege when it came to basic services and provisions. That situation and the widespread political ferment in the city also lead to a more fundamental structural critique of the inherently unequal socioeconomic system within which the majority working- and under-class population lived. Left-wing militancy escalated via "red

clubs" and various revolutionary *arrondissement* committees, especially in the poorer areas, supported by or including many National Guard battalions.



Present-day Montmartre, beloved of tourists.

On 18 March, three days after official notification that the Guard had refused national government authority, Thiers' military forces (the remains of the defeated French Army) were sent on a mission to seize its cannon (in the plural, observing the period-appropriate term) but were famously foiled at Montmartre. These weapons were either bought at great expense (thanks to contributions from poor *arrondissement* residents) or taken by the Guard during battles with Prussian forces on the city's outskirts. At Montmartre, local women appealed to and fraternized with the soldiers, resulting in Thiers' troops refusing to fire on the unarmed civilians, symbolically upending their guns. This famous incident accelerated a general insurrectionary mood in the city. National Guard forces soon took over most central *arrondissement* town halls. Meanwhile, two of Thiers' military commanders were captured and executed by a combination of mobs, Guard members, and defecting members of his own troops. In light of the escalating situation, the conservative National Assembly decamped to the symbolic space of Versailles (invoking pre-Revolutionary France of the pervious century), soon followed by Thiers and his ministers, along with the remaining military. The film suggests that so hasty was this retreat, "several regiments were forgotten in Paris."



The Hôtel de Ville today, which continues to house Paris' central government.

The National Guard Central Committee then quickly moved to occupy the abandoned Hôtel de Ville (Paris' equivalent to City Halls in the United States) and announced imminent municipal elections. On 26 March, various radicals and left-wing Republicans received sufficient total votes to establish a secular, loosely socialist Commune with no single governing political party or coalition. The *Commune de Paris* was officially declared two days later. Moving into the Hôtel de Ville, this new municipal government proceeded for two months and ten days to administer the capital in line with a radical social and economic agenda in explicit defiance of the National Assembly led by Thiers. Such an already Herculean task was made far harder by a new military siege now enforced by the latter's troops. It began with sporadic shelling of the city in escalating assaults from the west. (Following their demoralizing retreat from the capital, the government's military forces had regrouped at Satory, a camp near Versailles, where the national Army was gradually rebuilt. Prior to the final assault on Paris, these forces would be bolstered by returning POWs from the Prussian war.)

The Paris Commune's policy agenda included the following:

- strict separation of Church and State throughout public life (effectively meaning the eviction of the Catholic Church from its previously powerful role in the capital);
- free, state-run secular education for all children and adolescents of both genders;
- professional training for women, better enabling skilled employment and financial independence;
- ongoing general education for the adult population, including in the sciences and arts;
- establishment of unprecedented welfare provisions, including pensions for unmarried women, and universal child-care;
- supporting the establishment of worker-operated collectives where business owners have fled;
- reforming the tax system in line with a fundamentally redistributive model, and other initiatives.[45]

In addition to improving the material quality of life for the majority population, or setting out how to do so, both in its official policy objectives

and everyday citizens' discourse—as amply seen in the film—the Commune stressed the need for citizens to pursue everyday pleasures resulting from increased leisure hours, such as access to art and creative outlets. When it came to children and adults alike, writes Francis Mulhern, the Commune in this sense saw education as a life-long concern, emphasizing development of labour-force skills but also access to the world of culture:

> "[T]he ethos would be integralist or 'polytechnical', aiming at the harmonious development of the person, developing individuals capable of skilled labor and an active cultural life. 'He who wields a tool should be able to write a book, write it with passion and talent', went one statement of the ideal—or at least 'take a break from his daily work through artistic, literary or scientific culture, without ceasing for all that to be a producer'."[46]

If the only change brought about by a revolution is in the workplace (which is hard enough to achieve), then the fundamental values upon which everyday life is organized have themselves not been altered. This is a central proposition *La Commune* suggests throughout—especially in the lengthy discussions featuring everyday citizens, in particular women, which dominate much of the film's lengthy running time.

Lefebvre stresses the same principle in his writing on both city and rural space throughout *Critique of Everyday Life* and elsewhere. Aronowitz succinctly summarizes this important position maintained here and across Lefebvre's work:

> "If the old regime remains in force at the level of the family, personal relations, especially sexuality, and the structure of authority at the workplace, if the routines of repetitive everyday existence are preserved, if life is bereft of pleasure and desire is related to the dream work but is denied in the everyday, nothing much has actually changed. ... [A] grim, productivist society in which the individual is 'over repressed' almost inevitably becomes a 'terror society,' which is exactly what happened to the Bolshevik revolution after the seizure of power."[47]

This summary of a fundamental point in Lefebvre's writing also evokes well the more idealistic aspects of the Paris Commune's stated principles as well as its impossible challenges, more problematic moments, and highly truncated reality. The Commune's enormously ambitious program predated by many decades, and in more radical form, the first national welfare-state reforms emerging in Europe over 60 years later. But it was more explicitly claimed—just as Marx prophesized—to inspire the Russian, Chinese, and other 20th Century revolutions and resulting communist regimes, with the Commune's anniversaries regularly commemorated at official levels despite the fact that (unlike Paris in 1871) such revolutions lead to states utterly dominated by single communist parties wielding absolute political and military power. The fragile and ultimately inappropriate papering over of the inherent tension between the Commune's democratic, non-party-lead nature and these later "official" revolutions and militarized states became somewhat clearer upon the declaration of a "Shanghai People's Commune" on 5 February 1967 in the full flush of China's Cultural Revolution, when the city's official Communist adminstration was overthrown. Declaring itself based on the Paris Commune yet also crucially different, due to many key leaders' alliance with Mao and the Cultural Revolution against the majority Communist party (rather than the city itself), the Shanghai Commune lasted less than a month before being killed off by factionalism (a rival 'New Shanghai People's Commune' was soon declared) and finally due to Mao's

televised decree on 24 February that it would transform into the 'Revolutionary Committee of Shanghai' (and thereby serve what would become the gradual rapprochement between Maoists and China's majority Communist political and military elites).

Stressing the tension between the Paris Commune's still vital radical utopianism and the future twin 20th-century spectres of moderate (and eventually even more watered down) welfare-statism on the one hand and single-party authoritarianism (and resulting factional warfare) on the other, *La Commune* strongly evokes the constant threat of its elected government's slide into centralized power, oppressive security measures, censorship, and the general nightmare of a "terror society" at a time of depravation and civil war. These political conflicts are increasingly palpable throughout the film as it develops. But so, too, is everyday people's resistance to this threat and their concurrent resilience in discussing how best to liberate themselves, both at work and at home.



Paris' 11th *arrondissement* today, one of the city's more densely populated and less tourist-oriented inner areas.

All this was soon brought to a violent end by way of the national state's very real terror, when on 21 May Thiers' troops began their final, definitive assault on the city. In what became known as *semaine sanglante*—"bloody week"—huge numbers of men, women and children were massacred across Paris. The Commune's leadership abandoned the Hôtel de Ville, setting fire to it as they fled, before temporarily taking up residence in the Town Hall of the 11th *arrondissement*, the representative working-class district primarily featured in *La Commune*. Its walls were drenched in blood, the film tells us. Estimated numbers of those who died during these final days range from 10,000 to 30,000, the majority summarily executed on the spot. The last gasps of resistance occurred in the 11th, 19th and 20th *arrondissements*—all majority poor neighborhoods. Communards who escaped the firing squads fled France, were forcibly deported, or imprisoned. Upon the Commune's successful destruction and its supporters' mass murder, incarceration, or deportation, a government inquest into the cause of the revolutionary uprising found lack of religious belief a prime factor. Along with the mass executions, the first stage of Paris' "moral restoration" was completed when 4,500 Communards were sentenced to jail in the French colony of New Caledonia. But while this theoretically expunged the city of its human sinners, the metropolis itself needed to be "exorcized." The resurgent Catholic Church proceeded to build Sacré Cœur, triumphantly looming over Paris from Montmartre to this day, "to expiate the Commune of its sins."[48]



Sacré Cœur looming over the city skyline, seen from central Paris.

The force of France's conservative-Catholic restoration was felt far beyond the given historical context and national borders. A late text screen from *La Commune* sums up the immediate and longer-term ramifications:

> "Throughout Europe, the specter of the Commune justifies a repressive policy towards social movements, not only by Bismarck and the monarchies but also by conservative republics, existing and to come."

Meanwhile, the Commune had received scandalous coverage in the USA, made clear by an unintentionally prescient and chilling *New York Times* editorial quoted in the film:

> "Let Versailles turn Paris into a mass of ruins, let the streets become rivers of blood, let all the population perish, so long as the Government maintains control and demonstrates its power. May they crush all signs of resistance, whatever the costs, so as to give Paris and France a lesson they will remember and enjoy for centuries to come."

Beyond Europe—then at the height of its colonial exploits, with France a central protagonist—Thiers' vanquishing of the Commune inspired him to send troops to violently quell local uprisings in the North African colonies that had escalated at the height of the Commune, demonstrating both the Commune's contemporary global significance and colonial-era context.[49] Following their defeat, Berber prisoners were sent to the same New Caledonia jails housing former Communards. For Thiers' conservative Republican politics there was, apparently, an even lower level of depravity and potential threat to establishment right-wing France (and Europe) than that represented by the Communards. One purpose of deporting the latter in such numbers to New Caledonia, it appears, was in the hope that they would help "civilize" the native Kanak population.[50] In 1880, most of the revolutionary French nationals received amnesty. The anti-colonial Berber fighters, meanwhile, remained behind bars until 1895.[51]

In the section devoted to the Paris Commune in *Passagenwerk/The Arcades Project* (compiled between 1927 and his death in 1940), Walter Benjamin quotes a passage by one F. Mehringl. Looking back in 1896 on the Commune 25 years earlier as the last, and would-be corrective, gasp of the "official" French Revolution of 1789-99 that in the event gave rise to modern "bourgeois" France, Mehringl writes:

> "With the fall of the Commune, the last traditions of the old revolutionary legend have likewise fallen forever… In the history of the Commune, the germs of this revolution were effectively stifled by the creeping plants that, growing out of the bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century, overran the revolutionary workers' movement of the nineteenth century."[52]

Most subsequent commentators and some from the period have agreed that the Paris Commune was doomed from the start, especially in light of its relative isolation. Most famously, Karl Marx wrote on the subject in *The Civil War in France*,[53] first published as a 35-page pamphlet in London on the 13th of June 1871, (a cautionary quote from which is excerpted to explain the Commune's destruction in the *Communist Manifesto*'s 1872 preface[54]) and subsequently reprinted, later emerging in enlarged book form with additional material by Marx. In spite of its bloody defeat, Marx argued, the Commune was something of a forerunner of hopefully more successful future social revolutions, which would learn from its successes and failures, as would theoretical work on the topic.[55]

Harvey writes that like many other radical thinkers in the intervening years, Lefebvre also "knew full well" from this history that

> "socialism, communism, or for that matter anarchism in one city is an impossible proposition. It is simply too easy for the forces of bourgeois reaction to surround the city, cut its supply lines and starve it out, if not invade it and slaughter all who resist (as happened in Paris in 1871)."[56]

As with mainstream historical awareness and established political commemoration, alongside even the "successful" Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cuban and Algerian Revolutions, the Paris Commune's very short lived experiment—despite or because occurring in the West—is rather less familiar to the majority of film audiences than are the French and American Revolutions. This is to be expected for some of the reasons I have discussed. Even so, there exists a lengthy history of not especially well-known films encompassing different lengths, both narrative and documentary in nature (*La Commune* fits into neither distinction), primarily focused on this

event.[57]

Siegfried Kracauer writes emblematically in *From Caligari to Hitler*:

> "The technique, the story content, and the evolution of the films of a nation are fully understandable only in relation to the psychological pattern of that nation."[58]

While funded by French and European sources, and featuring extensive collaborative French involvement in the form of its crew and large cast, *La Commune* is also the product of an expat British filmmaker and thereby in part an outsider's contribution to a not especially visible historical, political, and filmmaking tradition. Following descriptions of the *semaine sanglante* massacres, viewers are told via text screen:

> "The French educational system—which denied us any financial help—maintains silence on these and other Commune events. This film is dedicated to French filmmakers who were prevented from making films on this subject."

The Paris Commune is, apparently, barely taught in French schools and enjoys no particular status within the general population. Something of a "repressed" or disavowed national event, it seems, the Commune also continues sporadically to play a totemic role for non-party political activists around the world, particularly those seeking to occupy public space in the interests of fomenting some form of broad revolutionary discourse and change.

Invoked afresh since 2010 by both Occupy movement participants and older radical supporters from the sidelines (such as Harvey, Chomsky, and Zizek), the Paris Commune nonetheless remains forever in large part a shrouded event: "The Commune as test of the revolutionary legend," writes Benjamin in summary of his sources in *The Arcades Project*.[59] Despite being seen—when at all—around the world as alternatively a "failure" or at best an early experiment in developing social policies much later enacted in Scandinavia and then welfare-state Western Europe, or else as a lingering if largely mythic radical inspiration, its lack of prominence in France's national, republican, and revolutionary psyche is telling.

The Commune seems to represent an important but awkward moment in both national and global revolutionary history that is impossible to appropriate for modern-day France and the global West.[60] This is increasingly so in recent decades, as states—the official ideology of governing parties typically mattering little—enforce with increasing vigour an ever more unequal socioeconomic system without any apparent alternative. While the Commune remains totemic for world revolutionary history and thinking, the events of Paris in March-May 1871 are thereby without official state recognition for the reason that no remotely powerful present-day political force can lay claim to the Commune's heritage. However in *La Commune*, its most substantive cinematic treatment, this crucial event comes to light and life in a truly remarkable, time travelling sense.

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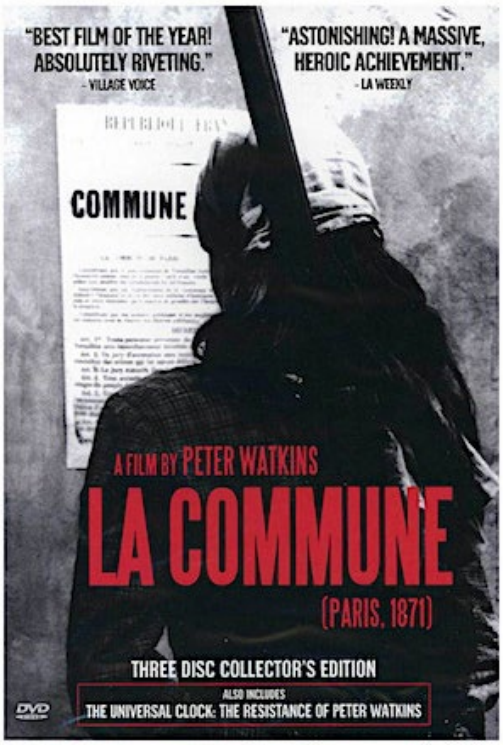
JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Peter Watkins' singular, reflexive vision

Like both Henri Lefebvre and the Paris Commune, Peter Watkins remains a not especially prominent name within the English-speaking world, despite having made two much discussed, medium length British films dating from the mid 1960s. A brief introduction of this singular figure is thereby in order before quickly moving on to analyze his last completed work, *La Commune*. Starting with early shorts in the 1950s, Watkins created a series of highly unique, reflexive films for both television and cinema up to 2000 (following which he has thus far ceased filmmaking activity). Fitting neither drama nor documentary definitions but incorporating and mutually complicating elements of both to often-radical ends, in interrogating either past or possible very near-future events these films offer living, contested, and palimpsestic versions of history.

Viewers are forced into active participation with Watkins' often obsessive charting of a specific and ongoing socio-political, moral, and cultural crisis seen up close through each film's very particular, local case study that at the same time crosses national and global contexts. Frequently, such context and stories are intimately connected to revolutionary energy and potential, be it personal, social, cultural, or more overtly political. His best known work remains the early BBC productions, *The Battle of Culloden* (1964) and *The War Game* (1965). The latter deals with the likely impact of a nuclear attack on Britain resulting from its Cold War role, and suffered a television broadcast ban for 20 years (despite winning an Academy Award for best documentary). Leaving Britain, since the late 1960s Watkins has had a productive but sporadic, consistently controversial international career, making a series of remarkable films around the world such as *Punishment Park* (USA, 1970), *Edvard Munch* (Norway, 1974), *Resan/The Journey* (made across 10 different countries, 1987), *Fritänkaren/The Freethinker* (Sweden, 1994), and *La Commune* (France). The director has nearly always fallen out with the often state-based institutional-production bodies commissioning this work, in large part due to the films' determinedly charting often subterranean, unflattering aspects of the given national culture, and the state's frequent subservience to imperial and military power.

Following the pattern throughout his career, after *La Commune*'s completion Watkins fought lengthy battles with its would-be exhibitors in the face of their rejection of the finished film (including a shorter cut). Such familiar problems appear to have finally taken their toll, with Watkins subsequently retiring from active filmmaking. The film's full-length version finally received its premiere on French television when most people were asleep.[61] [open notes in new window] If Watkins' work typically contradicts the dominant national mythology within a particular project's national funding/production/cultural context, as the 1960s receded his cinema remained both firmly wedded to historical developments while being also starkly at odds with prevailing ideological currents. This dissonance can be seen in Watkins' explanation for why he wanted to make a film about the Paris Commune.[62] *La Commune* and the director's previous films are far from mere "agit-prop" essays, no matter the clear ethico-political investments and frequent anger exhibited on screen by many participants and the filmmaker himself. Rather, this cinema relentlessly insists on the messy, in-process nature of historical reality in the most immediate, participatory and hopeful sense. The result is less a finished work than a self-conscious, presentational record of such a process, which becomes ongoing as re-engaged by subsequent audiences. With



The poster and DVD cover for Peter Watkins' *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*.

distinct formal methods marked by a unique brand of reflexivity, the films extend way beyond mere self-consciousness to include a properly discursive and "democratic" address enabled by on-screen participants' debating the contested topic at hand, including either by implication or by direct citing, its vital—although often disavowed—connection to present-day life. Rendered in such a way, history becomes an open, active, collaborative event on both sides of the screen, transcending the frame. So often central to this filmmaker's cinema, these qualities reach an apogee with his last completed work.

Directed by Watkins, based on a loose treatment be wrote in collaboration with credited researcher Agathe Bluysen, and workshopped throughout a period of months by over 220 mainly non-professional actors before an improvisation-heavy shoot, *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is a five hour and forty-five minute, intensely collaborative work.[63] Shot in black and white, this loose re-imagining of the Paris Commune is entirely staged in a large warehouse at Montreuil in suburban Paris, a site reputedly once occupied by Georges Méliès' studios and at the time of filming usually home to an experimental theatre company. This huge space contains a series of interconnected sets loosely standing in for select streets and building-rows circa 1871, occupied by working-class citizens in the 11th *arrondissement* and the town hall thereof, with a few other scenes set at Montmartre, an upper-class apartment, the Hôtel de Ville, Versailles, and Satory. However, the filmmakers go to no real effort in concealing the production's studio-bound, indoor nature. On the contrary, throughout *La Commune*'s running time the film emphasizes its warehouse location and the inherent theatricality of the whole enterprise. Despite most of the film theoretically being set outdoors, a large TV studio-style lighting rig is frequently visible perched above would-be normal ceiling height—the sets typically open straight onto the huge warehouse ceiling far above. The only other spaces we see are the "Versailles TV" newsreader's studio set and a one-angle medium-close up of Thiers as he addresses the National Assembly, the latter never shown. (See the 8th and final image of the visual essay at the start of this article for an example.)

An absolutely crucial aspect of the film is that only a tiny proportion of its scenes are devoted to showing elected Commune leaders, who are only ever briefly seen having a meeting or giving short speeches to assembled crowds. Comparably more screen time is given to Thiers seen addressing his Assembly. For the vast majority of the film's running time, we experience the Commune through the everyday people—supporters, detractors, and in-between—of the 11th *arrondissement* as they meet on the street and in bars, passionately discussing the fluid political developments, the Commune's proclaimed ideals, and its internal and external problems. *La Commune* thereby foregoes, or undermines, a version of history as driven by famous figures. Names such as Louis Auguste Blanqui, Eugene Varlin, Louis Charles Delescluze, Élisabeth Dmitrieff, and Louise Michel are all mentioned at various points of the film, and actors portraying them are sometimes very briefly seen (or sometimes they are shown "for real" via photographs), but are almost entirely absent.[64] Rather than such political protagonists or major intellectual figureheads—some combination of which feature in most scholarly historical accounts—the film only grants Thiers much notable attention (still small compared to everyday citizens). But throughout, he is only ever shown via the exact same medium close-ups, a heavily codified media-constructed image. This impression is strengthened further if we consider the possibility, sometimes suggested by the film, that images of Thiers comes to us via the government's television network feed.[65] This idea alerts the viewer to *La Commune*'s highly ambiguous nature when it comes to "whose" camera we are looking through at any given time—one of the warring "TV networks," or "our" film.

In typical Watkins style, we are asked to imagine the forces of present-day propaganda at work via an anachronistic portrayal of mass-media technology. In this film/TV Commune, the conflict plays out partly between two television stations: the government's own channel, introduced by its reporters as "National



A reporter wielding a microphone moves towards officers of national government troops to interview them about the impending mission to march on Paris and seize the National Guard's cannon, the latter's primary military defence, at Montmartre.



When the same reporter goes to speak to the young government army recruits, he hears complaints of material depravation, tactical incoherence, and – most importantly – that many of the soldiers intend to refuse orders to fire on unarmed Parisians, as their officers already suspect.



The reporter enters the 11th *arrondissement* of Paris, first talking to working-class citizens ecstatic at the insurrectionary turn of events.

TV, Versailles" (later derisively called "Versailles TV" by Communards), and an outlet seeking to represent the Paris rebels upon its first broadcast 40 minutes into the film, known as "Commune TV." While the latter has already been referred to in retrospect during the film's highly reflexive very first scene set after both the Commune's destruction and *La Commune*'s primary shoot (discussed below), once the central "story" is properly set in train, a scene 20 minutes into the film first calibrates what will be perhaps the most important formal dimension for the remainder of its running time. A reporter approaches government soldiers at their base for interviews prior to the ill-fated attempt to seize the National Guard's cannon housed at Montmartre. First we hear from some of the officers, who confidently describe the impending mission to seize the 30-strong cannon so as to restore the government's military and political authority over Paris. However, the interviews are intercut with footage of the same reporter speaking to younger soldiers standing grouped together nearby. Complaining of a lack of food and other material deprivations, they say that they "are not allowed to talk" and do not have the necessary military provisions to take the cannon. Describing the Montmartre orders as "totally vague," the men state that while largely supporting the principle of disarming the Guard, they will not fire on civilians as ordered. When the film returns to the officers following a few seconds of black screen, we hear that they already suspect their troops will refuse such orders. "Most of them are young recruits," one comments, "and don't grasp the need for vigorous action against the red elements." Five minutes later, following the failure to seize the Guard's cannon due to government soldiers refusing to fire on the crowed of largely unarmed women, leading to a general insurrection in the city, the reporter enters Paris and speaks to 11th *arrondissement* locals, identifying himself as being from "National TV Versailles."

Initially talking to working-class Parisians ecstatic at the insurrectionary turn of events, the reporter describes to Versailles TV's viewers an atmosphere of uncertainly and concern. He moves on to hear from more upper-class and bourgeois figures, many of whom will become familiar in later scenes. These include a man who says he works for the U.S. ambassador, whereupon the reporter asks with concern how the United States views these events. The bourgeoisie express their worry and fervent opposition to the prevailing revolutionary mood, condemning its supporters. As with nearly all scenes across the film, within a group of people sharing a general—here conservative—position, some diversity is still apparent, such that we hear views ranging from aggressive demands for reprisals through to more moderate concern at the course of events. Soon, pro-revolutionary working-class voices cut in again, articulating what the Montmartre victory means for them. Decrying the reporter as working for "bourgeois TV," then gesturing to two people in the background, one especially vocal woman cries: "We've had enough. We have journalists." The latter are then asked by the woman to enable an alternative representation of events more reflective of the majority working-class population's views and interests. Voicing support for the principle, the duo then point out they have no equipment, to which the above woman crucially replies: "That's why we must do it together, in a different way!"



An especially outspoken supporter of the insurrection and what it means, one woman condemns the Versailles reporter as representing 'bourgeois media', then gestures to two other journalists in the background who she says should take up the mantle of reporting events in a way that is more reflexive of the majority working-class population's views and interests.



The importance of everyday people to the Commune's origins and its media representation in *La Commune* are made clear when the same outspoken woman above suggests to the future 'Commune TV' figures that lack of sophisticated equipment requires a more democratic form of reporting.



Commenting to viewers how it is difficult it is to home in on a straight version of what has happened, the reporter interviews upper-class and bourgeois figures variously aghast, concerned, and appalled at the turn of events, expressing worry and defiance.

Initiated by an everyday *arrondissement* resident, at this moment is born both the idea of a "Commune TV" (she also provides its name) and its principles of more democratic expression whereby everyday people get to have their voices heard. "We have to stop censorship," a man nearby comments in response to the idea. Less than ten minutes later, we see the same two journalists in front of the camera brandishing microphones for the first "Commune TV" broadcast, explaining they have somehow managed to scrounge sound equipment from storage facilities, but warning us this new media source will not be able to compete with the professionalism of Versailles TV: "We might have technical problems as we lack equipment." Tellingly, however, a third figure is prominently caught on camera to the right of the frame during this introductory broadcast shot. (See the third image from the visual easy at the start of this article.) We soon learn he is a pro-Commune newspaper journalist critical of Commune TV's techniques and approach to reporting. Importantly, no explanation is offered for the reporters presumably also having cameras, and—with the exception of a brief glimpse in the film's first shot—such a camera is never seen on screen. (See the first image of the visual essay at the start of this article.) This elision sets in motion to the fullest degree the film's most slippery, multi-layered reflexivity. It remains for the viewer to decide where, or whether, the cameras of the warring television networks are different to those of *La Commune*.



'Versailles TV' studio broadcasts are immediately recognizable due to a presentational and 'objective' style entirely familiar from viewers' own experience of both commercial and public sector studio-set news and current affairs formats across the world.

Near the end of the film we are told national troops have shut Commune TV down, and that one of its former journalists (who had previously quit, saying he could no longer stomach reporting on illiberal security laws without critical comment) "decides to use his radio microphone to cover events in the 11th district." Once more, no explanation is given for how he is being filmed. What the viewer would previously have assumed to be Commune TV footage now appears to be the film's, or vice versa. We might well ask, what of all the other scenes in which reporters don't appear on screen? Following the early interview scenes, most of the subsequent "Versailles TV" footage is rather more instantly recognizable as such, thanks to twee theme intro music, gravely "objective" desk-bound reporters and professional presentation style, use of what was in 2000 still the standard television broadcast aspect ratio of 4/3 or 1.33:1 (*La Commune* itself is presented in 1.66:1, so the Versailles TV sequences are "pillar-boxed" with black bars on each side) and even some visual degradation of the broadcast signal.

Commune TV, meanwhile, features no studio-set reporting. Unlike the Versailles TV broadcasts, we see no shots where *La Commune*'s frame is laid directly over that of Commune TV in broadcast form. Apart form brief scenes where we see glimpse such images being screened on small television sets within the Commune, the latter's footage (where we may venture such delineation) is



'Commune TV' broadcasts are solely comprised of location footage comprised of brief interviews with everyday people and quick on-the-spot reports by the same two journalists, in both cases the people on screen looking right into the camera, the French *cinéma vérité* style made to match a loosely revolutionary political position.



Seeing the same footage of Commune TV journalists reporting and celebrating the Commune's declaration (and elsewhere other TV broadcasts from both networks) in 4/3 transmission format on a television set fifteen minutes later makes us question whether the extensive reports and interviews throughout *La Commune* in the process of being filmed comprise 'live broadcasts', 'raw footage', or a later 'screening' thereof after possible editing (which of course is the case for our film itself).



presented just like that of the film itself—in 1.66:1 ratio, hand-held shots, and without degradation. The extensive Commune TV sequences are entirely comprised of *cinéma vérité*-type images—in the French sense of the term, stressing the involvement of the filmmakers in the "pro-filmic reality" as opposed to the more objectivity-seeking fly-on-the-wall North American "cinema direct" tradition. These "TV" scenes feature journalists avowedly excited by the socio-political experiment at hand as they report on its development and speak with ordinary citizens on the streets. In both cases, people on screen either consistently or intermittently look right at the camera.

Commune TV does not foreground a deconstruction of mainstream media conventions. In particular, reporters strive to retain some kind of objective, "professional" mode of address—which, as with much more mainstream media familiar to all readers and viewers, seeks in part to obscure the deeply invested way in which news is framed while also declining to enter into analysis and critique. The footage in which on-screen reporters speak straight into the camera and interview people (often also looking right at us), which comprises all of Commune TV's and the minority of Versailles TV's footage (the non-studio-bound material, the latter presented as masked for 4/3 broadcast), is presented as seemingly "live". However, such a contrast is thrown very much into doubt by the fact that we also see sequences throughout the film showing both networks' footage as screened on television sets within the Commune—in the case of Commune TV in public, and Versailles TV in the private space of a representative bourgeois apartment. (In the rare case that someone is caught watching Versailles TV by a Communard, the former are queried as to their reason for watching reactionary, anti-Commune media.) Glimpsed as a small square frame within *La Commune*'s own modest rectangular one, in these scenes we finally get a sense of what Commune TV images look like in 4/3 transmission (unlike in the case of Versailles TV broadcasts, the film never shows us this incarnation up close). In one example, people watch Commune TV reporters describing the declaration of the Commune as broadcast on a television set, a transmission-formatted version of footage we saw fifteen minutes earlier "as it happened." Suggesting the existence of unseen post-production (and therefore editing) facilities, these transmission snippets also yet further undermine—especially for the Commune TV footage, being closest to *La Commune*'s own aesthetic form—the very status and temporal placement of the film's "pro filmic reality." Such frame-within-a-frame, "mise en abyme" sequences also strongly suggest the notion of the Commune becoming very quickly a mediated "virtual" event with no real center.

Most obviously via the presence of on-screen microphones, occasionally television sets, and direct address to camera ascribable to the "TV" aspect of this re-imagined Commune, the film's overt reflexivity is even more explicitly foregrounded by *La Commune*'s very first images. Following extensive white-on-black text informing the viewer about the historical context we are about to explore, an unsteady hand-held travelling shot, accompanied by the camera operator's loud footsteps, moves through what looks like a half-built or half-demolished interior set, starting with a composition featuring materials that could be related to the film (their on-screen or off-screen use is unclear), the theatre troupe that usually occupies the space, or neither. Our camera then moves through a door and into a large sub-divided warehouse space, seemingly in search of filmmaking activity. As the camera veers right we can briefly make out Peter Watkins and a small crew, with one technician looking directly at us, seen from behind and then to the left as the image continues its hand-held forward movement. (A still from this including Watkins, his crew, Commune TV actors, and various filmmaking materials, is viewable at the start of this article's introductory 'Visual Essay on Page 1.) In his only appearance on screen throughout the film, the director is seen here sitting behind a camera monitor before 'our' camera arrives at its apparent destination directly in front of a

After a minute of introductory text screens setting up the film's historical subject, the first image we see is a composition featuring dishevelled materials that could be for on-screen or off-screen use in *La Commune*'s production, or belonging to the theatre troupe usually occupying the warehouse, or neither.

woman and a man dressed in roughly period-specific circa-1871 clothes. The film's sets, a prominent electrical cord, and high-mounted lighting rig are clearly visible behind Watkins, the crew, and the actors.

Looking straight at the audience, the actors proceed to introduce themselves both by their own name and that of the characters they play, informing us that the massacre ending the Commune's short life has just occurred. The man says:

> "I play a TV journalist in this film which deals not only with the Paris Commune, but also with the roles of the mass media in past and present society."

His female colleague then introduces herself and her character, explaining she plays a "journalist for the Commune TV." Adding an extra layer of "auto-critique" to the film's already highly reflexive nature, she foregrounds one of its major themes:

> "First, what was quite difficult was that she's a credulous person, a naive optimist, and knowing the end of this story and the events of the Commune, it wasn't easy to keep smiling. Secondly, she likes her work in front of the camera so much that she forgets to denounce and mention the power of the media, which she represents entirely."

Any notion that this epic film will recreate revolutionary history by seeking any kind of "suspension of disbelief" is from the very start completely undermined in its extremely self-conscious and entirely theatrical or abstract presentation. Introduced in this way and then comprising a single massive "flashback," such a reflexive resurrection works to produce revolutionary history and space anew, now in the form of a virtual invocation and challenge.



The film's first post-text image soon becomes a hand-held travelling shot exploring the different domains of a large subdivided space as the camera enters a door, appearing to search for filmmaking activity within this large space featuring what look like half-built or -demolished sets.



La Commune's lengthy first shot comes to rest for a while in front of two people we learn play 'Commune TV' reporters, behind which we can see both the film's set but also electrical cord and a large TV studio-style lighting rig hung underneath the high warehouse ceiling.

Explaining the warehouse space's usual function as home to a theatre troupe, the man then says:

> "In April of this year, Peter Watkins and 13 Productions started to construct a film set, recreating the atmosphere of the 11th district during the Paris Commune. We would now like to present our work-place during these last three weeks."

The camera resumes its hand-held walk, now moving beyond the human figures deeper into the set, with the lighting rig still visible at the top of the frame, which now becomes devoid of human presence, including a very large empty space perhaps used to film the military scenes or a result of some sets having been already taken down. (See the second image of the visual essay at the start of this article.) The male journalist continues to speak over images showing one of many



One of the many passageways and rooms filled with furniture, debris, and weapons we see in the middle section of the film's first long tracking shot, which now features tighter framing but still clearly showing the warehouse ceiling and lights.

passageways and rooms filled with furniture, debris, and weapons that we now see in the middle section of the film's first long tracking shot, which now features tighter framing but still clearly shows the warehouse ceiling and light source:

> "Yesterday we finished the shooting and the set is exactly as we left it after the last scene. The following text will be added a few months later."

In due course, as the same shot continues to track through the set, showing an array of interconnected walls, furniture, and props. After a few seconds we hear the advertised audio-delivered "text" (which may or may not have been recorded "a few months later') presumably spoken by the female Commune TV reporter, now using the present tense but referring not to the time of the film's production but to that of the Commune's history immediately following its end:

> "Above the barricade flies the tricolor of the Government, replacing the Commune's red flag, which hung there earlier. Outside, a Government officer sat at his table with one and ink, sentencing hundreds of neighbors Communards to instant death by firing squad."



More tightly framed again, but with artificial lighting streaming in from above the set's ceiling-less walls, the ongoing travelling shot evokes the ad-hoc administrative processes and 'justice' enabling the mass-executions of Communards that we are told by the voice-over occurred 'yesterday evening'.

We are told that these events happened "yesterday evening." On screen we see a chair and table filled with disheveled paperwork, but no officer or accused Communards, the framing now tighter but with prominent artificial lighting streaming in from above the ceiling-less walls of the set. We hear more descriptions by both Commune TV reporters, speaking of an already spectral and theatrical Commune devoid for now of any human presence. The audience is then finally addressed by the female journalist over more footage of the eerily quiet space (the only sound being the camera operator's footsteps and off-screen narrators) where we have just been informed thousands of people were killed the previous evening:

> "We ask you to imagine that it is now March 17, 1871."

The film's first post-text shot has now continued unbroken for over five minutes. After a few more seconds an elderly male voice starts speaking off camera, with the present tense now seeming to be sometime shortly before the Commune's advent. He describes the 11th *arrondissement* of Paris, within which he and his family of five live, as "not an easy place to live." With many children living on the street, he notes that his family "is not the most miserable in this society," and concludes his discussion of abject inequality with apposite forthrightness: "We have to change it one day." At this moment, the travelling shot finally concludes after six minutes on a downward-tilted image showing the point where a wider passageway gives way to a much smaller alley, with a large bucket and drain-cover prominently placed on the ground—a symbolically charged, tantalizing but foreboding sight in light of the old man's narration and the story we are about to see played out.

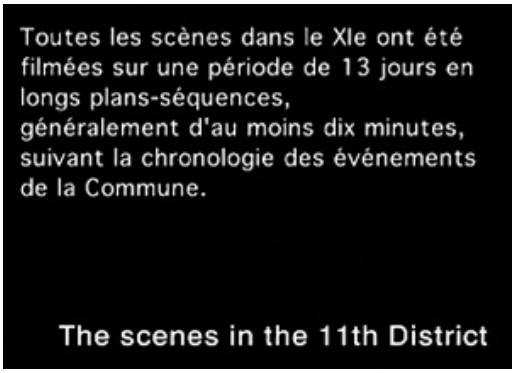


After moving through a variety of spaces all housed within one giant warehouse, the final resting point of the film's lengthy first post-text shot becomes symbolically resonant when accompanied by the older male voice-over and in light of the story we are about to see played out.



Following the film's first cut since its introductory text, the present tense now seeming to be sometime before the advent of the Paris Commune, we meet the first of a series of seated groups looking right at the camera before they eventually start to tell their stories.

Following the film's very first cut since its introductory text, we see a small family—the viewer may assume it is the same one just described, with the old male narrator now perhaps appearing silent on screen with his family (although we only see three people here)—sitting directly facing the camera, dressed in period clothes. The image is held in silence for a few seconds before they eventually begin to speak. The film's first seven minutes variously post-date both the Paris Commune and also, we are lead to believe, *La Commune*'s primary shoot. Upon this first moving-image cut, the film's mammoth but unstable central flashback now begins at a point just before the Commune's advent. Any lingering notions the viewer may have of the "past" in regard to both history and filmmaking are thereby from the start undermined.



While the majority of the film's copious white-on-black text screens inform the viewer of crucial historical events leading up to and during the Paris Commune, also increasingly offering contextualization and commentary thereon from a present-day perspective and undertaking many comparisons between the two eras, some text screens concentrate on the film's own production techniques, in this instance highlighting Watkins' preference for long takes. The full translation of this text is as follows: 'The scenes in the 11th district [arrondissement] were filmed in 13 days, mostly using long, 10-min. "sequences shots", and chronologically following the Commune events.'

When it comes to important formal patterns across the film, while some scenes do feature straight cuts between discernable shots, Watkins' more typical approach is for edits to be replaced by a few seconds of black screen sometimes followed by white-on-black text. Alternatively, what would be longer shots are fragmented by such "interruptions." From the film's very first moments, following its credits, on-screen text informs the viewer of crucial historical events leading up to the Commune and occurring during its brief life. Increasingly these text interludes throughout the film are just as likely to provide commentary on events, often including retrospective remarks from the present day that offer multiple comparisons with 1871, crucial intervening events, and those of the late 1990s. A handful of these text screens also concern details of the film's own production techniques, drawing our attention to how it was made and Watkins' preferred style. Black screens can lead to the arrival of text, a new shot or scene, or a continuation of the previous one. Irrespective of what follows, such visual "gaps" serve as giant reflexive markers—that there has been a "cut" within a shot, between two, or that on-screen text will further draw us out of the immediate drama. Even where two shots are edited together, what would normally be experienced as a simple enough cut is effectively highlighted to indicate the presence and active decision-making of the filmmakers, who constantly threaten to intervene via the constant threat of black and text screen interruption.



Audio interviews with government military leaders at Satory decrying the Communards as a criminal rabble are accompanied by images of the latter dancing in Paris.



During a rather shambolic troop drill for new National Guard recruits, the first scene played out in *La Commune* where the people on screen do not look exclusively at the camera, the actors still periodically 'notice' it when in close proximity, here seen when a Guardsman briefly glances right at the viewer before returning his gaze to the comparably more dramatic scenario played out just beyond the frame as the commander speaks to the men.



The film's liberal use of a 360-degree space with a hand-held camera means that when an edit technically crosses the '180-degree' line (usually ensuring there is no confusion of left-right screen directionality) it is barely noticed.

The regular blank few seconds, in particular, also have the effect of giving viewers a little time to reflect on the implications of such usually "hidden" editing and other filmmaking procedures. In addition, we are given time to think about the on-screen discussions about the Commune's purpose, character, and fate that we have been watching. Meanwhile, the very fact of the white-on-black text screens themselves regularly reminds us of the heavily narrated nature of this film and its highly constructed method of historical telling. The overt reflexivity of such text draws attention to the act of filming per se. Sometimes the text contains "flash forwards," telling the viewer what will become of a character or group on screen. Other occasional stylistic flourishes include the gradually increasing but still fairly spare use of freeze-frames at the end of scenes before another cut to black. There is also some limited use of sound-image juxtaposition. One notable example occurs when Versailles TV interviews with government troops at Satory continue in audio form over images of Communards dancing in Paris. We continue to hear government army officers dismiss the people on screen as a criminal rabble before the image track eventually returns to Satory.

For the above and other reasons, the film's overall stylistic character remains extremely presentational—in sharp distinction to a more "transparent" representational form. Initially foregrounded by its single, hermetic, "theatrical" space, this reflexive presentational style extends further in the filmmaking strategies Watkins and his team employ. Such spatial emphasis and allied filmic approaches are most obviously seen in concert through what is for *La Commune*'s first few minutes (following its introductory text) a consistently straight-to-camera delivery by the Commune TV journalists, then the small families who also look exclusively front-on at the viewer for some time, before slowly speaking about their everyday lives before and during the Commune all the while continuing to look right at the camera, with the highly artificial-looking sets given striking prominence. Then, after setting up a formal pattern comprising on-screen text, voice-over narration, and quiet direct address, 16 minutes into the film we get its first more "conventionally" staged action scene, in which the on-screen figures no longer primarily look right at the viewer. But even in this scene, showing a National Guard drill (a rather farcical sight, with the captain trying to make new members observe military discipline and hierarchy), and in many others across *La Commune* where actors "perform" and interact with each other in more dramatic scenarios, people continue to intermittently look into the camera before returning their gaze to the loosely rendered "diegetic" reality in which they are taking part. For a film like this, "real" reality must encapsulate the increasingly central role of audiovisual media itself—*La Commune*'s own production, its participants' experience thereof, and the resulting film's subsequent reception by viewers. This necessitates a thorough reflexivity that, for Watkins, actually reduces distance rather than enforcing any kind of "alienation effect."[66]

In concert with the brief, peripheral and often tentative-looking glances to camera (different from the extended front-on gaze seen in the first quarter hour), adding another crucial reflexive aspect to the film's otherwise comparatively conventional scenes, these more dramatic sequences also pay no heed to traditional feature-film grammar. The hand-held camera and Watkins' editing regime consistently present the warehouse set as a 360-degree space. With the first shot of the National Guard scene described above showing the new recruits from their right as they look screen right in the presumptive direction of the captain as he speaks, when the film cuts to show the latter finally asserting his authority (by means of articulating the political situation and the national government's military threats), the edit crosses what many formal analysts of commercial narrative cinema call the "180-degree line" by presenting him also looking right in the direction of his men, who are now off screen. Left-right directionality has been somewhat muddied by the previous moving shot, largely taken from the men's right but sometimes getting close to front-on. Five minutes

Here a National Guard captain addresses new recruits seemingly just off-screen to the right, whereas in the previous shot the latter had themselves looked screen right (meaning he would have been looking left if in frame) as they listened to, and interrupted, his speech.

later, the film's mixture of explicitly reflexive and comparably dramatic (if still decidedly non-representational) styles are properly fused—or one could say "calibrated," preparing us for many similar scenes across the remaining over-five hours—when the audience first sees what we soon learn is a Versailles TV journalist walking up to national government soldiers and brandishing a circa-1999 microphone to ask questions (as described above).

In addition to the anachronistic portrayal of audiovisual media—television, not to mention the "film" itself—in rendering *La Commune*'s 1871 setting, with extensive use of direct address for both whole scenes and furtive looks-to-camera, the film's fundamental presentational form is most strongly reinforced throughout by the prominent use of this single, highly theatrical space, variously subdivided to suggest different buildings, rooms, and exteriors without for a moment convincing the viewer we are anywhere other than in the interior of a large warehouse at the very end of the Twentieth Century.[67] In *La Commune*'s first half hour, most of its reflexive spatial, filmmaking, and performative elements are set in motion, starting to combine. As this epic production unfolds, these elements will continue to develop and cross-pollinate with escalating complexity and significance, especially when it comes to the question so rigorously thereby explored and voiced by this film: how to re-imagine, render, essay, and "produce" revolutionary history on screen.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Critical images, performance, and narration

Far from limited to its director's particular style or taste, *La Commune*'s troublesome but necessary combination of political investment and multi-tired reflexive form is directly responsive to modern history itself, recalling one of Lefebvre's central points. Always a Marxist with a keen sense of the cultural avant garde (as with Adorno's seeking to "update" Marx when it comes to both the ramifications of consumer culture and also radical innovations in the arts), Lefebvre had close, intense relations with both the Situationists and earlier the Surrealists, before falling out with and critiquing each. For art to retain historical responsibility, especially if seeking any kind of revolutionary participation, space itself can no longer be represented within artworks as "whole," irrespective of how desperately we may wish it were so in the interests of efficaciously fostering political change.

In a key passage from *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre writes:

> "[A]round 1910 a certain space was shattered. It was the space of common sense, of knowledge (savoir), of special practice, of political power, a space thitherto enshrined in everyday discourse... Euclidean and perspectivist space have disappeared as systems of reference, along with other former 'commonplaces' such as the town, history, paternity, the tonal system in music, traditional morality, and so forth."[68]
> [open notes in new window]

Made on the now-lengthy other side of such a divide nearly a century later, *La Commune* partakes of a cinematic tradition often loosely called "political modernism," starting in earnest with 1920s Soviet cinema's fusion of revolutionary materialism, formal-aesthetic innovation, and resulting demands on and for an active viewer. Such a breakdown of transparency and representational claims as checked off by Lefebvre, exploding across the arts in the 20th Century's early decades is, for a figure like Watkins, essential to maintain for the simple reason of historical responsibility, resisting the ongoing pull—including by allegedly progressive political voices—of conservative formal dictates so prevalent in much cinema, fiction and documentary alike, caused or at least strongly amplified by the dictates of the market.

Speaking in *The Universal Clock,* Geoff Bowie's 2001 documentary about *La Commune* and its director, actor-participant Sara Louis comments on the production and ultimate form of Watkins' film:

> "There's a lesson to be learned here too, which is that we must reconsider our relationship to images. As far as possible, we must carry on this resistance."

Watkins has characterized and criticized many audiovisual works' institutional-political as well as formal-artistic regressions and complicities as constituting what he calls the "Monoform." The filmmaker uses this phrase to signify the homogenized approach to form and aesthetics of finished works enforced at all levels of production and exhibition, with—contradicting the

usual industry-derived justifications, frequently repeated by compliant critics and commentators—scant regard for viewer involvement and agency. Speaking in Bowie's film, Watkins contextualizes the "Monoform" as follows:

> "The whole purpose of twentieth century mass audiovisual media is that it is not predicated on incorporating the ideas, feelings, experience, subjectivity, memory, knowledge, wisdom of the audience. … It's designed to withhold those, to push those away, and to instead engulf people with this fabricated, fragmented, arbitrary process… And that's why everything is moving very fast, to hold back any opportunity for the person to have time to come in and enter the material, and challenge it or negotiate with it or anything."

As in much of Watkins' cinema, *La Commune* concurrently offers and strives to generate a sustained critique of mainstream audiovisual form—especially as seen in many documentaries through their streamlined, homogenized tendency, most connected to the powerful Discovery Channel (the operations of which are laid out and critiqued by Bowie and others in *The Universal Clock*)—while at the same time seeking out alternative methods of engaging with history.

La Commune consistently criticizes familiar documentary and television "Monoform" techniques as differently enacted by both Versailles and Commune TV; in this way, to use U.S. parlance, we can see them as "conservative" and "liberal" variants of media conventions. With the exception of Versailles TV's studio-bound presentation, appropriately featuring a tripod-mounted camera, the rest of the "TV" and our own "film" sequences—where we may venture such distinctions—are shot with a very noticeable hand-held camera, often utilizing long takes of up to 10 minutes. The latter tendency is very much in keeping with Watkins' oft-stated belief that audiences need more time to interact with what they see and hear, so that a film or TV program can begin to undermine the "Monoform" and its prescriptive viewer relations. But while *La Commune* clearly doesn't conform to familiar mainstream formal conventions (surely explaining in large part its initial exhibition problems), neither does it ultimately fit within the also familiar, if less mainstream, category of a long take-dominant cinema that frequently seems to invest hopefully radical charge initiated by a temporally-enabled resistance to our now long-rampant capitalist modernity's inherent speed. Despite the long take's historical association with an often (although not always) politically engaged realist cinema, or a more ornamental and sometimes "mystical" kind of global art cinema, in this film what could be very lengthy shots are frequently interrupted by the cuts to black, as I have described. *La Commune* also features regular, often rather fragmentary brief shots—which, as with those on either side of the few seconds' black or text screens, again may or may not be continuations of previous scenes or precursors of others.[69]

The cross-pollination of *La Commune*'s multiple reflexive audiovisual elements frequently plays out on screen for the viewer as a series of slippages. As the hours roll by, the viewer senses an increasing confusion of roles and identities both in regards to characters or types and the actors playing them, and the different media texts involved. Despite the large numbers of on-screen speaking parts, some of these figures do actually "develop" throughout, often voicing different views and analyses of events as they unfold. The early scene showing soldiers being ordered to fire on the Montmartre crowd as the national forces try to seize the National Guard cannon, only to be dissuaded by the presence of unarmed female civilians, is both presented as a key moment in the early life of the Commune and strikingly staged. The military commander's failure is filmed in a highly theatrical yet non-dramatic way. After giving the women and National Guardsmen who have rushed to the scene

"two warnings," he simply gives up. Realizing the Parisians seem to have the upper hand and perhaps also that the soldiers will refuse to fire (as guessed already by officers in the previous Versailles TV interviews), the commander quickly retreats by walking backwards as if off a stage "into the wings." This highly functional gesture contrasts starkly with what follows. Less than a few seconds later, sensing their opportunity, the women rush the government troops to embrace them after one of the latter upends his rifle. Effectively heralding the mixed political experiment to come, if not its longevity, one of the women triumphantly shouts: "Long Live socialism! Long live the Republic!"



After unsuccessfully threatening the Parisians with violence while seeking to capture the National Guard cannon at Montmartre, perhaps realising his troops will likely refuse to fire on unarmed female civilians, the government forces commander simply walks backwards out of shot (seen here toward the right of frame) as if leaving a stage.



After the commander leaves the scene, the women immediately rush the troops following one of the soldiers thrusting his cap on an upturned rifle, sealing the moment for the Commune-to-be when it comes to its mythology but also the emboldened political role sought by women as they shout: 'Long live socialism! Long live the Republic!'

The euphoria resulting from the victorious Montmartre defense of the cannon, particularly among women on screen, is palpable. In the above highly theatricalized scene within an already very theatrical film, after running towards the soldiers and cheering, the women themselves—whether we see them as 1871 characters or 1999 actors—seem to "feel" the transformative power they have enacted, forging in the process a more developed comprehension, both properly emotional and rational, of the possibility and potential meaning of collective action as they have just experienced it.[70] The Montmartre victory inspires in the women a strongly proclaimed investment in the Commune and its fate, and their demands for representation within—which will be seen across many subsequent scenes. A series of Commune TV interviews soon after the Commune's proclamation feature groups of women ranging from two unemployed teachers who advocate for free state-run secular schools so that girls can at least be properly educated, to women emphasizing their distinct labor rights, while others emphasize the bigger picture by stressing the importance of being able to vote in elections and arguing that the Commune's Central Committee should properly recognize women's vital role in enabling its existence, thanks in part to the Montmartre victory. One woman exclaims:



The energy unleashed by the crucial role played by women at Montmartre provides a crucial narrative through-line for the film as seen in many Commune TV interviews with different women detailing their arguments about education, labour, and political claims both within and helping bring about the new Commune, before culminating in the story of the

> "I have needs, but I want recognition for all the women in the area, because it's thanks to us that the regular army didn't shoot. So please, the Central Committee must acknowledge us, so we can become members of this new assembly."

Staring down the camera, she concludes: "We're the heart of this revolution!"

In addition to women's prominence throughout the film, the story of their distinct claims and arguments when it comes to political representation is most clearly followed through with the development of the Women's Union, a

Women's Union.



Local members of the Women's Union arrive at the 11th *arrondissement* town hall to confirm the location of their meeting room as authorized by the Commune's Central Committee, only to find local administrators have no idea of the Union or its needs and little interest in the women's cause.



The first meeting of the 11th *arrondissement* division of the Women's Union begins with what in this film is a relatively wide shot – although still clearly very constricted – before moving in to focus on individual speakers and sub-groups, starting with the local organizer as she introduces the Union's purpose.



In a more relaxed discussion later in the film, with the present tense seems unambiguously to

story presented as crucial to the democratic and moral worth of this revolutionary experiment—both that of the Commune and *La Commune*. The first announcement of the Paris Commune Women's Union under the general leadership of Élisabeth Dmitrieff makes it clear that rather than recounting a heroic tale of Dmitrieff's efforts, in keeping with the film's focus on everyday citizens' experience we will follow the development of the more modest on-the-ground activities of its 11th *arrondissement* division. After the triumphant initial announcement of the Union's inauguration half way through the film, the next scene focuses on the rather more pragmatic problem of finding an appropriate meeting space in the local town hall, despite having prior authorization. The officers at the 11th *arrondissement* town hall either seem to know nothing of the Women's Union or show little interest in facilitating its local activities. This search marks both the struggle of nascent organized feminism within the everyday life of this self-proclaimed progressive political environment and is symbolic of the Commune's own travails in claiming, or "reappropriating," the city itself for revolutionary purpose.

Finally provided with a cramped, dishevelled closet-like room nowhere near big enough to house what they say will be "hundreds of women," the 11th *arrondissement* division of the Women's Union commences its discussions. Despite the insufficient space, even now the women have not been successful in finding a space of their own. At their meeting local men line the walls, and seem unable to resist speaking. The men's behavior hovers ambiguously between refusing to allow such an enterprise, solidarity with the cause, or wanting to fold it back into the Commune's larger class-based agenda (thereby erasing "gender"). Once again, the ambiguous interest some men show in getting involved in what is ostensibly a feminist political initiative plays out a tension that will be very familiar to those with experience of subsequent left-wing activist and progressive party-political activities, which often feature arguments around the question of women-only internal groups. Notably, the viewer is given audiovisual access to these discussions seemingly without the presence of Commune TV journalists. Compared to the latter's brief interview snippets, the Women's Union scenes feature more sustained conversation and debate, occasionally broken up by black and text screens, starting with a relatively wide but still clearly cramped shot before moving in to focus on individual speakers and sub-groups.

By way of introduction to the first meeting, the local Women's Union organizer begins by announcing its ambitions:

> "I'd like to remind you of 2 tasks of the Women's Union. The first is the defence of Paris. ... But the second, equally important, is to contribute to the social revolution which is the Commune's 'raison d'être.' For this revolution to succeed, women workers must free themselves from their state of slavery. This can only happen through cooperatives. These cooperatives should enable us to re-organize working conditions and to master the means of our production. We should, for example, be able to diversify our tasks, to stop repeating the same gesture all day long."

On the one hand, these ideas all chime perfectly with central Commune principles, yet the fact of the Union's focus on women's unique experience, and its spearheading of such crucial concepts as worker cooperatives, suggests the task will be even tougher in the context of what is still an almost totally male-dominated political climate. Temporarily interrupting the lengthy meeting scene, on-screen text suggests the work of the Women's Union remains to be completed 128 years later.[71] Later in the film, another lengthy sequence features many of the same women now sitting in a less cramped space, seemingly speaking more directly for the camera as if commenting on their experiences for it, in a relaxed fashion describing what it was like to make *La*

be 1999, possibly at the end of *La Commune*'s primary shoot, actors from the Women's Union scenes discuss their experience of the film and what role it could play upon distribution.

Commune. Tellingly, one woman asks about the distribution of the film. Another, perhaps optimistically, says the idea of the film attaining commercial distribution is heartening, before finishing with an apposite stress on this experience as one that transcends the frame and notions of a finished product:

> "We should distribute not only the film, but also the life that took place around it."

The consistent slippage between actor and role remains from the very start of the film one of its central techniques driving this revolutionary film-history's palimpsestic mode of representation. In using the very same gesture as seeking to foster local and broader communal action, as described above, this ambiguity stresses on both historical levels (1871 and 1999) the basic principle of the human subject's reclaiming her own body, mind, and emotional life, as well as her immediate environment for the purposes of work, rest, and pleasure, away from the contemporary "owners": men, capital, and the state. As Lefebvre argues in *The Production of Space*,

> "Any revolutionary 'project' today, whether utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda."[72]

Much of *La Commune* can be seen as playing out such fundamental, incredibly challenging gestures of reappropriation within different social contexts.

The same ambiguity and ethical question is repeated on the topic of audiovisual textuality itself, as we are never quite sure whether a sound-image is being recorded by "our" film's camera, a "TV" network's, or we are watching one of the latter's broadcasts. Of the audiovisual text itself, the viewer is asked the same question as posited above in relation to the body: Can a film be reclaimed from its traditional enablers, owners, and definers as dictated by the economic, production, and ideological imperatives of the "Monoform," but also indeed by a singular author such as Watkins himself? On both levels, human and cinematic, this is history as very much "living" performance and process, whereby different layers of the performative and filmic text, and history itself as generated thereby, emerge and merge at different moments. The film collapses linearity in a process that is both confusing and highly informative.



In another discussion featuring a 1999 present tense, one of many in the film featuring a bar setting, actors compare present-day life to that of the 19th Century, pointing out both the vast differences and disturbing continuities of inequality, and asking whether people today are capable of revolt in light of increased material comfort and the diversion of a relatively ubiquitous and atomizing entertainment culture, notably television.

Such an address is both necessarily problematic and enormously generative, so that the notion of revolution emerges as both more relevant than ever while also forever mired in contradiction, myth, and perhaps impossibility. We struggle to really know what it might be beyond human and media performance. One of the film's multiple discussions held in a small bar sees actors talking about what it has meant to participate in the film and to what extent the Commune resonates with their present-day situation, comparing inequality today to that of the 19th Century and asking whether people are prepared to revolt in a world defined by increased material comfort combined with a ubiquitous and frequently atomizing entertainment culture, notably television. Then an on-screen text screen, quoted in full at the start of this article, posits that what the people in this film experienced and express is exactly that which dominant "Monoform" media typically shuns or is "afraid of… to see the man in the little rectangle replaced by a multitude of people, the public."

Although Watkins' and the film's general political allegiances remain clear enough throughout, the critique of mainstream media on screen is not simplistically "partisan" but rather more pluralist. In a late scene, an "expert" commentator suggests the Versailles TV news presenter refrain from showing

semaine sanglante footage as planned, arguing that to screen such images would risk rewarding "base instincts of the viewer." (The expert is played by a real-life Royalist historian, whom we see in *The Universal Clock* being told by Watkins to "speak your own mind" on the subject of the Commune.) And indeed *La Commune*'s viewers do not get to see any such "recreations." Offering a reason one could easily imagine Watkins himself voicing in one of his "Monoform" critiques (despite apparently oppositional politics, and likely using less elitist language), the TV commentator concludes:

> "I am afraid that in the future, things will go from bad to worse, and that whatever form it will take, the media will be a spineless affair, seeking to sell its merchandise by appealing to the lowest instincts."

While the production budget was likely insufficient for any spectacular action scenes to be shot, Watkins surely agrees with the commentator on this basic point.



As soldiers drag Communards from hiding places in the final stages of *semaine sanglante*, anti-Commune upper-class characters shout for their deaths.

We witness Communards lined up against a wall presumably waiting for news of their execution, archive photographs of cadavers, and some brief high-contrast imagery of bodies piled up. The viewer also sees Versailles soldiers raise their guns in unison and hear shots ring out, but any falling bodies remain out of frame. We see no live-action recreations of individual or mass murder. The closest to violent action sequences are brief shots of soldiers dragging people from their hiding places into the street to face ad-hoc tribunals as anti-Commune crowds shout for their deaths. Appearing directly following the interview with the Royalist historian, it is unclear whether these images comprise select footage screened on Versailles TV or whether they are part of "our" film. The footage is also soon both intercut and combined with audio and occasional shots of Thiers announcing the Commune's end. While Watkins retains a characteristic refusal to show actual violence, the above action-style shots have something of an "excuse" if we see them as constituting Versailles TV material.

The film seems ultimately less interested in pillorying Versailles TV than closely assessing the ramifications of Commune TV's uncritical relation to the Commune's more questionable developments and its own non-studio-bound yet non-self-conscious "Monoform" iteration. *La Commune*'s own media commentary thereby clearly operates outside a very narrow—and to contemporary viewers, highly familiar—liberal/ conservative dichotomy, in fact reserving its most urgent critique for notionally "progressive" media. This comes to a head as the Commune Central Committee enacts increasingly draconian measures in the interests of "security," including escalating censorship decrees. But this tension between the idealism of the Commune's initial declaration and actions carried out by elected representatives in its "defense," both internal and external, is present from very early on. "Despite the enthusiasm sparked by the election, the fear of centralized power is in the air," a text screen informs us shortly after the Commune's inaugural elections, with the Committee of Public Safety recalling legislation enacted in 1779 "as an infamous instrument of political terror. To talk of this Committee in 1871 revives sinister memories." We do not get such blunt commentary from the Commune TV journalists. Their unseen bosses, further text tells us, subsequently make an editorial decision not to mention an article by a prominent left-wing newspaper about the new law and increasingly draconian aspects of this Committee, "for fear of negative reactions."

Immediately following this we see some crucial fly-on-the-wall style footage in which no one looks into the camera, showing an argument between



The two Commune TV reporters and the newspaper journalist debate how best to cover the Commune, with the former emphasising the need for total support and defending their technique of interviewing everyday people, making sure they 'allow' conservative bourgeois characters to speak, while the latter (sitting in the middle) stresses the importance of analysis and critique, adding that he admires the TV interviews but feels they are too short.

the Commune TV reporters and the author of the above-mentioned article. The latter—the same man we initially saw awkwardly standing alongside the Commune TV reporters in their very first broadcast—argues that the pair should adopt a more analytical and critical attitude toward unfolding events. "It's also true that your interviews are very interesting," he says, "since people have things to say." But, sitting between them, the newspaper journalist adds a crucial qualifier reminiscent of Watkins' own complaints about "Monoform" media: "But it's too short, you've got to give them more time." The female TV reporter then offers a revealing retort familiar from a thousand mainstream media spokespeople and apologists: "But you need to have rhythm to win people's attention on television. It has to be fast paced like that for people. If we have debates go on forever, they'll just turn off the TV."

As the film develops, it returns repeatedly to the topic of increasing media censorship. At one point, the male Commune TV journalist reports:

> "[T]o counter unceasing rumors of defeat and panic, the Commune has banned Versailles-oriented newspapers advocating private property and social hierarchy."

His female counterpart explains with even more striking propagandistic effect:

> "[T]he reactionary press slanders the commune. That's why information such as ours is so important."

They both then exhibit some possible unease with such illiberal developments while avoiding having to voice explicit critique themselves, by quoting pro-Commune newspapers that openly condemn the banning and argue the Commune's ideas should be strong enough to withstand both internal and external opposition. "On the pretext of war," on-screen text then more frankly notes, "censorship will shut down not only 30 'reactionary' newspapers, but also critical pro-Commune newspapers."



Following a tense report in which the male Commune TV journalist clearly expresses his frustration with the increasingly secretive behaviour of the Commune's Central Committee, his counterpart interjects, asking to 'cut'.

Around four hours into *La Commune*, the propaganda role of Commune TV comes under growing strain when the journalists report from outside the Hôtel de Ville about the Central Committee's increasing political infighting. The male journalist shows clear frustration at the endless restructuring and committee forming, and the constant specter of a military government with the ongoing question of the National Guard's political role. Recounting the move towards centralized control of the Commune by the Jacobin faction, each reporter uses different expressions to describe the turn of events, now openly interrupting each other. Introducing the news that a Committee of Public Safety has been formed, the female journalist calls it a "historic event," while her colleague instead laments: "The moment is very grave." Of the debate over whether to establish a five-man Executive to oversee the internal and external crises engulfing the Commune, he speaks with clearly escalating anger: "The Commune members discussed at length whether or not to publish the minutes of these divisive sessions. Will we ever be allowed to see them?" Clearly annoyed, his colleague interjects by flapping her hand at the camera and insisting: "All right. Cut!" The camera, be it Commune TV's or *La Commune*'s, does not "cut," but the reporter's instruction, referring to either the camera operator or the producer about later editing of the footage for transmission, makes it clear that this is likely not a live broadcast. Turning to him, she cries: "What's the matter? You're at it again?... Giving negative information isn't your

job."[73] At the end of their argument, following the customary few seconds of black screen we read: "The next day, the reporter resigns, saying that this Committee betrays Commune principles, and that he can no longer act non-critically in his work."

Trans-historical, multi-vocal discourse

Beyond the specifics of its filmmaker and the historical event referenced on screen, *La Commune* insists on the lived nature of historical reality in the most immediate, performative, and reflexive sense. There is no simple production of revolutionary space, and no simple textual-artistic articulation thereof. Far from being of one mind about the Commune's purpose, outcome, worth, and what can be learnt from it today, participants in the filmmaking process are visibly engaged in being asked to bring, and develop, their own opinions to the roles and scenarios on screen. This results in the rather messy, heteroglossia-style voicing of debate about a contested history in its vital, although often disavowed, connection to contemporary life and global problems. These are addressed implicitly or explicitly through a reflexive and avowedly non-realist theatricality on the intimately connected levels of human performance and audiovisual form.

More urgently than the question of revolution itself and lingering, mythic left-wing investments therein, the Commune has enjoyed some renewed sense of relevance in light of recent global events particularly due to the means by which the Communards attempted their revolution. They were, to use Lefebvre's terms, "reappropriating" and "reclaiming" urban space with a view to its "production" anew. If the film's own analogous fate in Watkins' account (summarized in footnote 61 above) is anything to go by—logical enough, perhaps, in light of the Commune's unclaimed status within official French history and politics—*La Commune* at the very least "updates" a story not usually heard outside radical circles. More precisely, this particular *histoire* (the French word invoking both "story" and "history" is very much appropriate here) is delivered via its production method and final cinematic form. The democratic, "workshop" style of the film's manufacture, its variously reflexive elements, and long final running time, all effectively preclude any commercial release in cinemas (outside festival screenings). The film connects the immediate, fundamental concerns of the Commune very clearly to today's unresolved global problems of increasingly gross socioeconomic inequality, most prominently apparent in our major cities—then as now.



A young National Guard recruit discusses the then-recent redesign of Paris by Haussmann, ushering in the glamorous avenues featuring expensive boutiques later beloved of tourists, commenting that such urban transformation emphasised and further exaggerated the divisions between the bourgeois and upper-classes on the one hand and the majority population on the other.

During the quiet section starting seven minutes into the film featuring small groups speaking straight into the camera (with no "TV" reporters yet in sight), each describing their experiences of both the siege and poverty more broadly, a National Guard recruit explains that the official French Revolution of 1789 was "a bourgeois revolution," changing nothing for working class families like his. More "recently", he continues, harsh socioeconomic divisions have became much clearer with the just-completed rebuilding of central Paris (1853-70) by Georges-Eugène Haussmann, resulting in the glamorous avenues and shopping arcades enjoyed by tourists to this day. The young Guardsman concludes:

> "Sure, we pass by shop windows with splendid suits and hams hanging from the ceiling. But for who? Three working lives couldn't buy that stuff."

If it had been more widely released and reviewed in 2000, *La Commune*'s scenario, concerns, and particularly the lengthy on-camera discussions of the West's ongoing consumerist stranglehold, would have been very much in tune with the then very active (and misnamed) "anti-globalization" activism and a new wave of protests around consumerism in North America, Europe and elsewhere.[74] Watched fifteen years later, the film seems no less contemporary in light of the last few years' explicit critiques of spiralling inequality, shouted across big cities' central squares or via diverse online media dialogues, of state-enforced capitalism's ever more extreme incarnation.

The essential problems and expression of basic ethical disgust at the status quo, leading to radical and far-reaching alternative ideas argued over throughout the film by ordinary citizens—pertaining both to 1871 and 1999—are far from completely removed from those we have seen expressed on the streets of major cities since late 2010 in the Middle East (largely excepting Israel), responding to many decades' rule by usually Washington-backed dictators. The following year saw protests in much of the West, spurred on by the harsh effects of state responses to the 2008 global financial crisis in the form of the most hypocritical "austerity" characterized by radical cuts to spending on public services combined with massive government handouts to the very same financial institutions that caused the crisis in the first place, as discussed in Part I of this article. While basic average living standards in the West have increased in the 145 years since the Paris Commune, inequality has long been worsening once again across the developed world since the gradual dismantling during the 1970s and early 80s in the USA, UK and many other Western countries (to varying degrees) of the post-WW2 "mixed economy" or "Keynesian" model to be replaced by a much more radical version of state-enabled market capitalism.[75] The result is that the sharp socioeconomic disparity of the 19th Century—which our contemporary "neoliberal" ideologues seem to hark back to—that motivated the Communards' revolutionary efforts (in concert with anger at the national government's capitulation to imperial German control at the Franco-Prussian War's conclusion) is now truly global and thoroughly networked in scope thanks to the Internet. While basic living standards may have increased overall, with the post-WW2 welfare state today increasingly underfunded or abandoned (or in the case of the United States, never really born), socioeconomic inequality has not only drastically increased once again over recent decades. On-screen text from the film details how it is, in fact, far worse than in 1871.[76]



As the National Guard leave for what will turn out to be its disastrous march on Versailles, the Commune TV reporters approach Polish soldiers quietly looking on, the men explaining they are in Paris with the hope of playing a role in revolutionary opportunity represented by the Commune as part of a larger Europe-wide struggle to overthrow the old political and religious order.

In addition to class disparity, even the simple demographics of today's cities and those of Paris during the Commune are not so different as one might assume, with an active presence in the latter of guest workers from the French provinces, the newly acquired African colonies, and other European countries. The Commune was home to about one hundred thousand immigrant workers and political refugees, the largest numbers being from Italy and Poland. Importantly, many came to Paris after being involved in uprisings elsewhere that either met with a bloody end or, as in the case of Italy's just-completed *Risorgimento*, lead to another bourgeois-nationalist outcome, with the hope of helping ignite a new internationally-minded local and national-based revolutionary wave to once more try and overthrow Europe's established political, social, economic, and religious order. The film gives explicit expression to this motivation and story, particularly in the form of lengthy Commune TV interviews with Polish soldiers observing the doomed march on Versailles by the National Guard, who later go on to take leadership roles in the organization, explaining how they have come to be in Paris after failed revolutionary activity in Poland and Siberian exile.

Meanwhile, with a great many of the Commune's chief architects, Guard



Interviewing a Versailles TV reporter who has been 'undercover' in the 11th *arrondissement*, the studio host asks about the prominent role played by 'foreigners' in the Commune, making fun of the prominent Polish names, the Russian Dmitrieff ('sent my Karl Marx from God knows where'), and the fact that there are even 'Arabs in the Guard'.



In one of the cramped bar scenes throughout the film, a group of Communards are told of the copious repressions and atrocities carried out by French forces in the Algerian colony.

commanders, and regular citizens and supporters not being French nationals, Versailles TV reporters play up the "foreign" element. At one point the familiar studio host makes fun of what he calls "ridiculous" Polish-sounding names repeatedly heard in Paris, following which his colleague—the reporter we met earlier, who has since been "undercover" in the 11th *arrondissement*, until being unmasked by angry Communards—complains: "At every meeting, in all the small groups, foreigners all voted, that's all I can say." In a later transmission, the same two figures discuss the influence of Dmitrieff, describing her as "a Russian aristocrat sent by Karl Marx from God knows where," adding that she is supposed to be "a hot number," before the compare asks with some astonishment: "Even Arabs in the Guard?" His reporter-colleague confirms the remarkable rumor.

While the connections between key Communards and Russia, Poland and Italy, as well as the long-exiled German Marx in London, are very briefly gestured toward in the film (the latter is barely touched on), much more time is spent in *La Commune* on the connections between the Commune and France's broader colonial context. The debate between the TV reporters and the newspaper journalist about responsible pro-Commune media activity (discussed above) comes to an abrupt halt by way of a starkly different perspective when they are interrupted by a National Guardsman and a woman bringing news of an uprising in Algeria by the Pahis—a local version of the National Guard, but formed and commanded by colonial forces—upon returning home from Europe after being forced to fight for France again the Prussians. A text screen then tells us that many Algerians also remained in France to "rally to the Commune." However, we are also informed, racism is nevertheless far from unheard of in the Commune via the example of a prominent National Guard commander well known for calling Algerian members "niggers." In one of the bar scenes elsewhere in the film featuring Communards crammed around a large table, French nationals and North Africans tell the group about having seen and experienced at first hand the truth of France's plundering in its new colonies. One of them switches to the present tense, noting that today the oppression is economic whereby the poor —presumably referring to the global situation, as well as inside France and its now former colonies—are disallowed access to the system. This discussion is then interrupted by a text screen detailing an occupation by 350 "illegal aliens" of a Paris church, "to denounce the state's refusal to resolve their administrative situation." The date given for this reappropriation of space in the name of political—now "post-colonial"—insurrection is 18 March, 1996.[77]

If the three journalists and other Communards in the film are silent at news of colonial atrocities in Algeria and elsewhere, while seeming to listen attentively, the film makes clear that the Commune itself is the product of an inherently colonial culture and far from able to escape it, irrespective of how interested these French revolutionaries may or may not be in enlarging the frame of reference to incorporate such a dimension. Throughout scenes directly addressing the question of colonialism, the Commune's progressive and variously leftist nationals are faced with the difficult truth that their experiment in radical democracy essentially relies upon colonial exploitation. The bread eaten by poor citizens, one man tells the group, is made from wheat involuntarily grown and harvested for the French regime in Algeria. Here again the film prompts another striking resonance with the era of globalized capitalism in which its viewers live, such that even if someone wants to be an "ethical consumer" (however that may be defined) it is very hard to spend money outside an inherently exploitative and now technically post-colonial yet Western authored, and largely still Western dominated, economic system. In these and other respects, the diverse microcosm of 1871 has in the intervening century and a half only enlarged to become the global norm.

The most immediately obvious and "novel" way in which the film constitutes a trans-historical address remains Watkins' trademark inclusion of a modern audiovisual mediascape within *La Commune*, which both encourages such time travelling and the opening up of political debate per se and the media's role within it. This is both a provocative act of translation familiar from the director's earlier historical films—such as *The Battle of Culloden* and *Edvard Munch*, each with loose settings predating the advent of film, yet featuring straight-to-camera documentary style interviews—and an entirely proper invocation of what reality means for a contemporary audience increasingly inter-connected via televisual and online networks. Will viewers—generally speaking, or more specifically when it comes to those who see this film—attain a sufficient state of ethical disgust at the status quo to "turn off the TV," get off social media, and "do something"? The critique of key aspects of the bourgeois capitalist state and how it functions that motivates the Commune and much of its population, and the messy, often conflicted alternative vision thereby forged, are in the film both performed thanks to the presence in the cast of people with different political views and understandings of this radical democratic experiment. When it comes to elected representatives and regular citizens of the Commune, we hear a broad array of opinions, ranging from advocating the capitalist system's outright abolition in favor of a communist or anarchist model (or a fusion thereof) through to more liberal-progressive Republican politics, with substantial sequences also devoted to those Paris residents maintaining a thoroughly anti-Commune, usually class-based position. Meanwhile, the more overtly present-day discussions by the film's participants on screen range from radical left-wing critiques of the now far more globalized "neo-liberal" U.S.-authored order, through to speakers encouraging more moderate "reformist" and human rights-based positions, encouraging support of charities and non-government organizations such as Amnesty International or Médecins Sans Frontières.

The texture of different political positions voiced in *La Commune* are, according to a late text screen and Watkins' website, broadly shared by the actor-participants themselves. As with his earlier *Punishment Park*, the largely non-professional actors were partially selected in accordance with their approximate political views, with the aim being to match as closely as possible the articulated ideological positions of on-screen characters with those of the real-life people playing them. Figures playing Communards thereby display diverse left-wing rhetoric ranging from revolutionary to moderate in such a way that we are never quite sure who is speaking—"character" or actor. Meanwhile, those playing Versailles TV reporters and various bourgeois and upper-class figures are apparently played by real-life conservatives and right-wingers of different kinds. With such a focus on argument and discussion, the film's multi-vocal presentation of in-process, palimpsestic history spanning 1871 and 1999 means that the stories and experience of the Commune are told through and debated via "ordinary people" both then and now who hold diverse, often fluid views on the topic at hand and enthusiastically want to argue them through. That most of the participants knew little or nothing about the Commune beforehand means that each person's thinking about its significance and meaning was very much developed throughout the film's production, as influenced by a general political or ideological predisposition. Beyond the question of what exactly is said, this chorus of mixed, in-process political positions on the topic of the Commune and its meaning features a highly intimate and unconscious texture at the very point of each individual performative moment. *La Commune* is, importantly, overflowing with an instructive variety of voices when it comes to accent, language, and vocal timbre.

The majority of the film is spoken in French, but an array of accents and linguistic styles are heard throughout, from the well-educated diction of



One of the Polish soldiers asks to speak in Polish in his Commune TV interview, while a comrade to his immediate left translates what he says into French.

Thiers, the Versailles TV journalists, and the various business owners and other bourgeois figures, and more rarefied speech patterns of the upper-class characters, through to the contrasting majority working-class, regional, and "foreign" accents displayed by Commune citizens from elsewhere in Europe and North Africa. In addition to this instructively diverse, accented French, we also hear Polish, German, and Arabic in the film. The translation of these languages into French does not occur via subtitles (as with the French spoken by most of the actors and all the on-screen text in the U.S. DVD version) but rather "live" on screen, by one of the many people standing nearby—someone who could be another character/actor within the loose diegetic scenario but might also easily be, and on one level certainly is, a translator specially employed by the film for such a purpose, wearing period clothing due to being on screen.[78] The Polish officers again provide a good example, one of them asking to speak to Commune TV in Polish while his comrade translates.

In addition to different accents and languages, we also hear a significant diversity of vocal timbres when it comes to age range, from children to elderly people. And as I have already suggested, female voices have a very prominent role throughout—singularly and in both mixed gender and women-only groups—as well as the voices of men of various on-screen occupations, from shopkeepers and employees to soldiers, journalists, and the unemployed. Meanwhile, the film deftly sidesteps the question of privileging one spoken accent and timbre to narrate or relay the historical context and comment on its events. Watkins replaces what would have been a very powerful off-screen "void-of-God" narration with French text screens.[79] The lengthy tale is thereby told in the form of what remains a privileged but also contextually appropriate written language, drawing attention to the fact that this is both a very "French" story but also one in many respects disowned by "official" France, while also being of significant international importance. Combined with the regular few seconds of black usually highlighting edits between scenes and text screens, the use of copious written instead of audio narration also means that the film offers a stark set of audio oppositions strongly felt by the audience. Viewers are frequently lurched from absolute silence (sometimes, although not always, accompanying black and text screens) to the very diverse vocal mix, ranging from quiet individual expression and more intimate discussion scenes, to dense and often chaotic crowd sequences and boisterous singing, and back again.[80]

Partly by way of its reporters' consistently accented speaking voices and overall comportment, the national government's Versailles TV unambiguously extols the power of imperial nation-state aristocracy and powerfully "rational" recounting of contemporary/distant history, portraying the Communards as dangerously amoral "anti-French" troublemakers, "criminals," "foreigners," and "prostitutes." But beyond the addition of loosely binary TV networks and the inclusion in *La Commune* of anti- as well as different pro-Commune perspectives, even within the latter it becomes increasingly clear that this is not just Watkins' or anyone else's film when it comes to articulating a single view of the events and ideas at hand. Instead, a mass of multiple opinions is repeatedly given literal, variously accented voice. More than a simple mournful work about an event much mythologized by the now long-disenfranchised global radical left, the film illustrates in great detail, and again across time periods, how difficult revolutionary change really is. This remains the case even just considering the differences of opinion amongst the ostensibly progressive internal forces amassed under the banner of the Commune, let alone taking into account the seemingly insurmountable enemy beyond (the national government, particularly its military force). Through portraying the political and tactical challenges and contradictions of forging a coherent, unified political program, the film thereby once more points to closer connections between the Commune and recent events than might initially

seem obvious.

Benjamin points out that the Communards themselves were never anything like "pure" revolutionaries, but rather comprised a large assortment of political positions and beliefs. This was starkly the case when it came to elected representatives. He quotes Delescluze, the prominent journalist and military officer of the Commune who was killed right near its end. The Commune "was formed of a coalition of revolutionaries without a common program," writes Delescluze.

> "Of the seventy-eight members, only a score were intent on projects of social reform; the majority were Jacobin democrats in the tradition of 1793."[81]

The Commune presented itself as seeking to continue, complete, or finally "correct" the official Revolution of the previous century and its aftermath by providing a more properly revolutionary conclusion. "The Commune felt itself to be, in all respects, the heir of 1793," writes Benjamin.[82] But what this means was very much in the eye of the beholder. The familiar point of revolutionary disagreement concerned how total such transformation would be, and the nature of its ultimate political tenor following the successful overthrow of the old order.

With the previous century's revolutionary violence and subsequent repressions providing a sobering tale, from a leftist point of view the risks inherent in such a revolutionary experiment as the Commune were enormous. In fact, they are always far greater for the left than for conservative and right-wing forces, who despite their professed horror at radical change (of the left-wing kind at least) are virtually guaranteed to benefit from any attempted overthrow of the status quo following a brief moment of instability or chaos. Lefebvre writes of how the French Revolution provides the clearest of instructive history lessons on this question. The cautionary (and here pessimistic) but vital "Nietzschean" strain of his thinking coming through once again, Lefebvre lists the results of this seminal event—all of which contradict revolutionary left-wing principles. He writes:

> "Even if one takes a pro-revolutionary stance, it is no longer easy to look upon all results of the great revolutions as 'beneficial.' The French Revolution, for example, gave birth (contradictorily) to the nation, the state, law, (modern law, i.e. Roman law revised and 'appropriate'), rationality, compulsory military service, the unpaid solider, and permanent war. To this list may be added the disappearance of forms of community control over political authorities that had been enjoyed since antiquity. To say nothing of the bourgeoisie, capitalism—in short, the advent of generalised violence."[83]

Interestingly, this litany seems to apply to both the short and medium term aftermath of unsuccessful revolutionary action and "successful" revolutions, especially in light of the latter tending almost universally to be dominated by a single political party claiming to embody the revolution even as it immediately moves to establish a regime in many respects antithetical to the principles originally inspiring such radical change. That there was no "vanguard party" motivating or dominating the Paris Commune accounts for a large part of its historical importance and ongoing fascination—including, many scholars argue, causing significant re-thinking by Marx himself (marked by and extending beyond a reference to the Commune included in the 1872 edition *Communist Manifesto* preface). [84]

While in recent times we have not yet seen the full establishment of an

equivalent to the Paris Commune, none of the diversity of views within it and lack of "coherence" when it comes to an overall ideology more typically associated with a dominant organized party would be especially unfamiliar to activists involved in the various occupations, uprisings, and left-wing political developments since 2010 that I discussed in Part I. More specifically still, the central causes driving the Commune's ultimate downfall remain again perhaps surprisingly relevant today. Most obviously and problematically, as Marx pointed out at the time in "The Civil War in France,"[85] the ambitions of the Communards, but also in part of our own various present-day would-be revolutionaries across the capitalist world, will be inevitably blocked without the insurrection's gaining total control of the national bank (in the EU's case today the European Central Bank) and, as 1871 suggests, the military. The Commune was choked economically from the outside, just as its severely under-resourced defense force (the National Guard) was ultimately unable to fend off the ever-growing reconstituted French Army. Second, an internal democratic openness and lack of hierarchical party-driven "program" marked both the Commune and the last five years' urban-based activist surges to varying degrees. In many respects, this would also be played out by events in Paris and elsewhere that became known as "May 68" (for which Lefebvre was a prominent intellectual ally and inspiration).



In comments that cast both back and forward through history, the increased threat of centralized power is discussed by a group of Guardsmen, comments – as another scene addressing this issue nearby makes plain – that can refer to both politics and the media in the modern context.

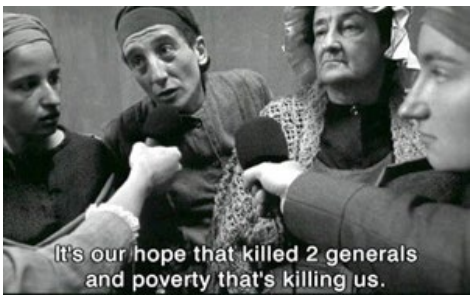
At the same time as offering a primary reason for the Commune's dissolution, its lack of centralized control or "vanguard" leadership by a single party in favor of loose notions of consensus politics and participatory democracy is also frequently considered a crucial bulwark against the drift towards potentially totalitarian control. Long plaguing radical activists and theorists, this problem is dramatized within the film as the Commune faces escalating interior threats—real or perceived—as well as external ones, resulting in significant contradictions. The development of a powerful Central Committee within the Commune divides supporters between those who feel their revolution slipping away and others who argue that the desperate situation calls for such measures, as seen in many discussions amongst both National Guardsmen and regular citizens. Elsewhere, with the present tense perhaps more ambiguous—appearing to speak with the hindsight not only of the French Revolution but also the Soviet Union and other modern revolutionary outcomes—a young woman suggests to reporters: "Events show what happens when power is centralized." Finally, as Lefebvre would put it, re-claiming the right to the city—or in more moderate terms, as Chomsky has characterized the global occupation of parks and city squares since 2010, "defending the global commons"[86]—today remains a crucial act, if in itself inherently rearguard or even technically conservative, which plays out like a performative ritual echoing across history, marking such unresolved problems.

Meanwhile, no matter the historical period, critics of revolutionary fervour within the film play an important role in voicing scepticism and concern over the chaotic and increasingly violent nature of events. The bourgeois and upper-class figures in *La Commune* act like uncharacteristically disempowered "witnesses to history"—a role to which they are more starkly unaccustomed than the film's majority working- and under-class protagonists, and deeply shocked to experience. They are not, however, just one-dimensional figures of ridicule. In scenes where privileged women (and sometimes men) are interviewed in groups by Versailles or Commune TV journalists in Paris or at Satory, they often comment very aggressively on the Commune, coming across as archetypical reactionaries if to differing degrees. The film spends more time presenting these characters in other contexts, with quite different results. One example is the owner of the dressmaking business, shown in conversation with her would-be workers across a series of scenes throughout the film. More precisely, the owner and the employees address each other but almost entirely through the "medium" of the Commune TV interviewers and their invisible

camera, in their first scene together each party situated on opposite sides of the shop's exterior door. The business owner can't understand what has happened, why Paris' workers are in revolt and two Versailles generals have been killed, hoping things can return to normal. While trying to keep in their boss' good books enough to enable future employment upon any return to normalcy, standing on the other side of the doorway the would-be workers offer a different view of events, clearly desiring to speak their minds by supporting the Commune and its ideals of transcending such an exploitative socioeconomic system—presenting the distinct possibility, in other words, that the normal state of affairs should not in fact be restored.



Standing on one side of the exterior door to her shop opposite her employees, the owner of a dressmaking and wash-house business explains there is no work for her employees, saying she doesn't understand the revolutionary turn of events and why insurrectionary forces have killed two generals.



The business owner's would-be workers explain their different views of the insurrectionary mood, trying to express support for the Commune while being careful not to directly criticize their boss and thereby jeopardize their chances of future employment.

While working-class characters such as the above women get the most inspiring lines and are treated with the most obvious sympathy by the film overall, their somewhat representative petit-bourgeois boss plays an importantly informative and critical function across the scenes in which she appears—even while saying comparably very little here and throughout, mainly looking on at the escalating events with increasing worry. In her eyes she is just trying to make a living and also, in the way the economy still loosely functions, provide work for others. She illustrates in the film how small business is assaulted by such a revolutionary moment, but less due to leftist attacks on capitalism itself and more because Paris has been put in an economic stranglehold by the national government trying to crush the radical experiment going on inside the capital. On one important level she represents a "middle-of-the-road" voice whose would-be "apolitical" arguments clearly ring hollow with self-interest. But at the same time, such an archetypal petit-bourgeois figure also effectively points out, irrespective of intention, that without a fundamental socioeconomic reordering that effectively abolishes free enterprise, people like her will remain vital to the everyday viability of a society when it comes to the basics of work and provision of goods.

Another example of *La Commune*'s important treatment of class-based anti-Commune citizens is strikingly different to anything else in the film. A handful of scenes return us to what a text screen introduces as an "upper-class" apartment relatively cut off from the chaos, in which a matriarch writes letters to her daughter in Versailles about the situation in Paris. "I loathe the Parisians being in constant revolt," she writes when we first meet her—a meeting made explicit by her occasional gaze straight to camera. She sharply criticizes the government for delaying taking the cannon from the National Guard and botching the operation. In later scenes we also see her watching Versailles TV transmissions and hosting a dinner party. The film's anti-Commune story is in many respects most thoroughly and interestingly played

out in this quiet, heavily codified hermetic space. At the dinner party scene following the Committee of Public Safety announcement, the matriarch and her guests offer critiques of the Commune that often quite closely chime with those of the pro-Commune left-wing newspaper report mentioned above, the Commune TV journalist who resigned over no longer being able to uncritically report regressive measures, and many everyday pro-revolutionary working-class people on the street whom we hear expressing increasingly critical views of the Central Committee's exponentially regressive decrees.



In the first of a series of scenes set in a representative 'upper-class' household, we see a matriarch write to her daughter in Versailles about the revolutionary events in Paris, criticizing both the Communards' actions and that of Thiers' government in failing to bring the rebels to heel.



During the dinner party scene at the upper-class apartment, the host is complemented on the food (especially in light of Paris shortages), before one of her guests reads from and criticizes a recent threat by Thiers to the Commune leadership, saying this as what he finds most worrying.

As with the pro-Commune working-class characters, the dinner party guests also exhibit a diversity of views in response to recent events. After they have all agreed on the excellence of the dinner, especially in light of food shortages in Paris, one of them goes so far as to quote from and then criticize a threatening proclamation by Thiers to the Commune leadership that was printed in the newspaper. The guest describes the language of France's national leader as "quite menacing" and "an incitement to civil war." This, he says, is what worries him the most (by implication, more than the actions of the Communards). Later, during *semaine sanglante* we hear in voice-over (accompanied by shots of the empty apartment sitting room and writing materials) the contents of another letter written by the matriarch describing the hope and joy of expecting Government troops to arrive in central Paris. She then expresses her dismay at the paranoid depths to which the army seems to have fallen. "But what despair and horror," she says in voice-over, "when we saw regular army soldiers bringing back a Battalion officer who had spent two days among us, to shoot him."

Soon after the Commune's violent destruction, on the street another upper-class figure standing in a small group of similarly attired women begins to criticize the massacres, saying she just can't believe Thiers has ordered such an atrocity. This confession works to encourage her friends to reveal gradually how ashamed they are of the army. "During 5 days, we witnessed human butchery," says one woman who we saw hours earlier expressing utter horror at the Commune and its supporters. Describing how they played women in the film who were predisposed to reject the revolutionary events on class grounds, the actors then proceed to comment on how important the Commune has proved to be when it comes to fundamental democratic principles and forward-thinking policy.[87] The upper-class and bourgeois characters at times offer surprising critiques of their "own side" of this Civil War, eventually painting the Commune in a much less negative light than earlier suggested by some of the same figures' vitriolic interviews in which they come across as violently reactionary. Following the Commune's initial declaration four-and-a-half hours earlier, while a more moderate upper-class woman admits the

working class have reason to revolt but that she doesn't want "things to get out of hand," her friends are rather more blunt. One describes the insurrection and subsequent Commune as "grotesque and illegitimate," while an especially outraged man asks: "What do they want? They're being lead by foreigners." While this initial response is important to articulate, for much of the film's latter half *La Commune* presents a much more complex, not always predictable portrayal of its anti-Commune class-based antagonists. Thanks in part to the significant and increasingly nuanced role played by bourgeois and upper-class figures, in addition to "internal" left-wing and working-class critiques, we are forced to face up to the Commune's—and any revolutionary period's—darker side.



A group of upper-class women stand around as the magnitude of the *semaine sanglante* atrocities sinks in, gradually expressing their shame for what the army has done, before the actors describe what it was like to play conservative anti-Commune characters and discuss the historical and democratic legacy of the Commune.



Responding to the Commune's official declaration earlier, the bourgeois characters are heard in full reactionary mood, condemning the Commune and its supporters, criticizing what they see as an illegitimate attempt to return to the previous century's revolutionary period.

In addition to the colonial question being presented as an interesting but ultimately peripheral side issue for most Communards even among the theoretically sympathetic ones, and the presence of racism within the Commune, evidence of persistent sexism is also repeatedly apparent, especially as expressed by the National Guard. This is highlighted when the Montmartre women suggest they join the Guard's doomed march on Versailles to help, including serving as medics—an idea treated as reasonable by one uniformed man holding a young girl, but risible by others. Everyday racism and sexism, then draconian law and order decrees, censorship, and regular interrogation of suspected spies by officers of the Commune (including the case of a drunk man arrested and accused of making "defeatist remarks" in a bar whereupon he is suspected of being "in contact with Versailles") are all soberly recounted by the film as regressive aspects of revolutionary history it is important to confront. Also made clear is the fact that life was often much harder during the period of the Commune for the very people it purported to be serving. In one of the later scenes featuring discussion at the dressmaker and washhouse business, we see the women finally back at work. However, the telling cost of this is soon revealed when we learn they are only working thanks to a major contract between their employer and the Commune itself based on severely reduced wages. One of the women comments: "It's all topsy-turvy: The Commune is in power. And the boss says they're only paying half." A text screen then informs us that a subsequent investigation into the clothing trade finds that the Commune has been signing cut-price contracts with employers offering lower wage costs.



Spurred on by their role at Montmartre, there is a move by the women to join the Nation Guard in some capacity, to help the march on Versailles, an idea greeted as ridiculous by Guardsmen except one voice offering general support.

La Commune tells viewers at the start of its end credits that the film "has been made with the collaboration of 220 citizens of Paris and its banlieues, plus a group of 'illegal aliens' from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia." In addition



Three quarters into the film, we return again to the dressmaker and wash-house business where we see the women back at work albeit at reduced wages, the exquisite irony of which is pointed out by one of them when she describes a 'topsy-turvy' reality in which they are either unemployed or get paid less than usual under the pro-worker, left-wing Commune.

to the collaborative and personal research involved in the film's preparation, we are informed that participants were free to develop characters "according to their own experience and motivations. What they say is largely based on their personal beliefs and feelings." If this information had been provided near the start of the film, the important but often ambiguous slippage felt by the viewer when it comes to deciding who is speaking in a given moment—character or actor—would be more clearly foregrounded. But it would also make this performative question far less generative, taking away one of the central means by which *La Commune* insists on viewers' active engagement with what we see and hear. To learn of this production context at the end of the film ensures the viewer is finally made aware of the inherently trans-historical nature of its multi-vocal discourse. The on-screen discussions and arguments throughout, either directly or across intercut scenes, constitute a key driver of *La Commune*'s complex, paradoxical sense of a time-travelling "presentness"—its virtual staging of a purportedly dead, "failed" and long forgotten or repressed moment of revolutionary possibility for on- and off-screen audiences and participants circa 1999 and subsequently.

The key to the film, in so many ways, remains its palimpsestic style of history telling, featuring a constantly fluid and ambiguous present tense yet all the while insisting on a sense of literal presentness. That this evocation of grassroots democratic discourse occurs thanks to an audiovisual medium so often employed to pacify viewer-consumers is made clear throughout. At a work cooperative meeting, one man says: "It's not only a question of work equality and profit sharing. It's also equality of speech. Everyone has the right of say. And then everyone discusses it. That's real citizenship. That's what strikes me during the Commune. People experienced citizenship all the way." Another responds: "Do people have the right of speech today?" A third replies: "TV talks to you but you can't answer."

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Ramifications of multi-temporal space

The time travelling brought about by *La Commune* between 1871, 1999, and whenever the viewer subsequently watches it, opens up a multi-temporal space. In his use of cinematic time, including but not limited to the preference for lengthy takes plus the film's overall duration, and a focus on historical themes, Watkins remains a modernist in the familiar sense as outlined in Part I above.

Critic Chris Fujiwara writes that the particular temporality of *La Commune*, as enforcing critical engagement, thereby becomes spatial:

> "Time, then, becomes the most critical boundary. In *La Commune*, when a character onscreen suddenly starts talking about the Commune in the past tense and from the perspective of today, the slippage reveals time to be not a fiction, but a variable space for a kind of structured free play in which the consciousness that it *is* play (that this is 1999, that we are actors playing the people of 1871) is not suppressed but allowed open expression. ... This passage across what would, in 'real life,' be an insurmountable time barrier, constitutes a radical step towards the decolonization of interior space."[88] [open notes in new window]

Here lies the effectiveness of the virtual space opened up by the film for the viewer, which Fujiwara suggests is forged by its particular temporal processes in the form of "structured free play." This can be strongly sensed throughout the film as a record of its own production, one that was clearly quite transformative for many participants, as well as a customized process ignited in partnership with each subsequent viewer. Time in *La Commune*, Fujiwara continues,

> "is like the time that Water Benjamin, in the fourteenth of his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' qualified as 'not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now.'"[89]

This "now" serves to invoke the past and future concurrently. But through stressing a paradoxical palimpsestic version of contemporaneity, it insists on the present-day subject (be they on- or off-screen) taking responsibility for her role in history, as history gains material form or vertiginous "ground" via a highly theatricalized space and multiplicitous filmic and human performance.



As disgruntled upper-class and bourgeois characters look on, we see exuberant scenes among the majority working-class population of Paris' 11th *arrondissement* upon the Commune's proclamation, a trans-historical

What makes the intra- and inter-scene debates across *La Commune*'s long duration interesting and informative is that the political positions we see and hear expressed, be they relatively clear or confused, are also connected to the 220 on-screen participants' diverse backgrounds. Even where many of them had no real prior knowledge or views about the Commune itself, the broader issues raised by the event (and in part fought over) are familiar enough to seem ongoing, hence a cause of genuine present-day debate is sustained.[90] The cast's active involvement in researching this history prior to filming resulted in a communal auto-didactic process, the freshness and creativity of which is palpable on screen through appropriately messy, fragmentary articulation of

excitement that appears quite genuine when it comes to the experience of rendering such history on film.



Even as the fight is surely hopeless, Communards at the barricades continue to boost themselves up with anger at the government's assault combined with determination and pride in defending the Commune and their roles within it.

unresolvable arguments and challenges escalating in substance through the film. Upon the Commune's initial proclamation, the people onscreen are seen experiencing a truly euphoric moment, exhibiting palpable and seemingly genuine excitement as they dance, sing *La Marseillais*, and shout their mutual joy to comrades, Commune TV reporters, and *La Commune*'s camera. Over four hours of screen time later, the anger and determination seen in the barricades sequence, even as the fight now appears hopeless, comes across with visceral intensity. While viewers are never fooled into believing we are watching a would-be transparent represention of events in 1871, neither do the figures on screen appear as if they are simply "acting" after being told to express a particular enthusiasm or emotion. Rather, what we witness on screen is an extended record of very real and diverse energy generated by a social but also very personal kind of autodidact history-learning, fused with creative collaboration and political radicalism.

Looking out over present-day Paris from her apartment as seen in *The Universal Clock*, Sara Louis reflects on how participation in *La Commune* has affected her view of the city, commenting on the three churches dominating the skyline at the center of which is Sacré Cœur. Perched high at Montmartre in the distance, looming over the metropolis, she now sees the massive basilica beloved of tourists as a literal icon of the Catholic Church's triumphant reclaiming of power in the capital. At the same time, for more recent visitors with no knowledge of the Commune, it effectively both celebrates victory over and literally covers up vanquished revolutionary history. We might also recall from *La Commune* at this point the appropriation by "red clubs" of churches to hold nighttime political meetings, resulting in the cessation of evening mass. This is explained in one scene as due to the churches being the only spaces large enough to hold such increasingly popular gatherings after majority work hours, enabling maximum participation. But it also effectively illustrates the degree to which radical politics was literally taking over the previously "sacred" space of organized religion in the Commune's fundamental remaking of daily life in the city. The Commune may not have eradicated the churches per se, as Lefebvre evokes in the quote at the beginning of this article, but these very particular spaces were partially—if far from entirely—re-made when it comes to at least temporary purpose. It is also important to note that a great many scenes, nearly all of them featuring women, show how the Commune unleashed long-repressed frustrations at and critiques of the Catholic Church and its priests by everyday people tired of being judged for their life circumstances, appearing exhilarated to see its power diminished.



Looking out over present-day Paris from her apartment in *The Universal Clock*, Geoff Bowie's Canadian documentary about Peter Watkins and *La Commune*, actor-participant in the latter, Sara Louis, comments on the three churches dominating the skyline culminating with Sacré Cœur, perched high at Montmartre in the distance, built to 'expiate the Commune of its sins.'



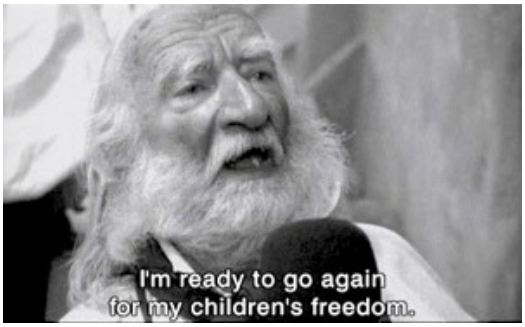
Women standing outside a church offer sharp critiques of how the Catholic Church and its priests treat women and how it effectively keeps the working class enslaved, while others inside describe their frustration at being judged for their lifestyles despite still attending mass.

Louis continues to describe her overall experience of *La Commune*:

> "This is an amazing way to learn history. In the sense where history serves as a memory to understand what's going on now… I feel the experience of this film makes us take a position on, what is the role of the individual inside a collective?"[91]

On the level of verbal discussion alone, Watkins and his collaborators' film offers a kind of abstracted-yet-real space in the process of being produced or brought into being through the articulation and debating of serious questions about how the city, nation, and world are run and the ongoing effects of this. The results on screen, comprising the film itself, offer a democratic version of living history as textual heteroglossia, performed and framed as an ongoing and decidedly unfinished process rather than end product. This would also apply, Watkins hoped, to the film's reception, which is why *La Commune* at times comes across as a very high-quality pedagogical experiment in discursive provocation. In a genuine sense, that is exactly what it is.[92] All this is nowhere clearer than in the film's presentation of the Commune's final days.

The scenes mainly comprising interviews with figures at or near the barricades feature a present tense slipping constantly between May 1871 and 1999, with occasional—and sometimes humorous—references to the Commune's final days as "now," prompted by the former Commune TV



The now free former-Commune TV reporter undertakes a series of interviews with people near the barricades, asking actors if they would have fought in 1871 and if they would do so for similar ideals today, resulting in a diverse and often confused range of responses following an old man's unquestioning, trans-historical affirmation.



A woman who played one of the more outspoken workers from the dressmaker and wash-house shop scenes appears rather less sure of herself in response to the question of whether she would defend the Commune.

reporter so as to "remind" interviewees-actors of their life-threatening situation. Each on-screen figure has a different response when asked if they would have gone to the barricades in 1871, or do so for the same principles today, ranging from absolute confidence through to confusion, qualification, and outright rejection. Often the answer provided depends on the level of trans-historical continuity asserted by the interviewee. Some suggest that no matter the period, one must always "go to the barricades" to fight for a better world, citing subsequent struggles and wars, including WW2, in which there was no choice but to "choose sides," as seen in the first interview with an old man who says he was "at the barricades in 1944" and is "ready to go again for my children's freedom." Others say they would perhaps have supported the Commune at the time but today do not believe any such action is possible, or that the struggle must play out on a different, less material plane. Meanwhile, a third category says they would never put their lives on the line for such principles, then or now. We also hear from those who seem to honestly not know, confessing their fear, such as one of the more outspoken women from the dressmaker and wash-house business scenes, who now says in response to the question of whether she would defend the Commune: "I don't know! I'm afraid of the barricades." Another woman immediately shouts back at her, seemingly speaking in 1871: "We've got nothing to lose!" Meanwhile, the film also details the killing by Communards of hostages and prisoners during *semaine sanglante*. However, the actor playing Marguerite Lachaise, a rare female National Guard officer, notes: "Though the Commune murdered 100, the other side massacre nearly 30,000." Over archival photographs showing rows of slain bodies, she asks: "Where does violence come from?"

In a nice metaphor for the Commune itself, the film's last section also features a series of connected scenes showing attempts by teachers (two women we saw hours earlier speaking to the camera before the Commune's proclamation, advocating what would become one of its signature policies, free state-run secular education) to teach their new Commune-run schoolroom class during the government troops' military assault on Paris, discussing what is happening outside. Against the sound of war, in discussions about the Commune and its values and how the new education system they are all involved in reflects them, some of the girls argue they need go and help fight the Versailles forces to defence such principles. Meanwhile, in keeping with the film's stress on diversity of response and opinion, other students bow their heads in horror and in one case resort to prayer (a move mocked by a neighbouring girl). Ten minutes later we see some of the same children at the barricades, nervously but determinedly preparing guns alongside adult Communards. *La Commune*'s barricades sequence finishes on this imagery, with one of the film's very occasional freeze-frames showing a girl familiar from the schoolroom scenes as she looks right into the camera. After a few seconds, this image cuts to our first smoke-filled sight of government troops arriving after their military victory, shouting for the last "stinking reds" to come out of their "holes." (See the seventh image of the visual essay at the start of this article.)



A series of scenes inside a classroom – featuring teachers we met near the start of the film advocating for the kind of state-run, free, secular education system they now work within – show discussions about the Commune and its values, how this mode of education reflects it, and finally what is happening outside, with the students increasingly arguing they should go to the barricades.



Ten minutes after the last schoolroom scene we see some of the same girls at the barricades helping adult Communards load guns, before the barricades sequences concludes with a rare freeze-frame on a girl we also saw in the previous image.

After the final school sequence and one last interior scene at the upper-class apartment devoid of human presence (described above), the film shows us "what is happening outside" as we travel alongside the former Commune TV reporter, whose interview technique appears unchanged. Tension between this media presence and "reality" is immediate. One woman holding a rifle at the barricades shouts into the microphone: "Stop asking questions! We need help." Another woman even more bluntly complains: "The biggest pain in the ass is that you're still here recording, watching everything but not giving a fuck. Whether it's a film or reality, you just stand there." She adds with anger: "And I'd like to kill that." Seconds later, a man standing beside her appears to speak as much if not more to the viewers of these images we are watching as to the reporter interviewing him: "You hide behind your TV and watch us die off. TV is slavery." He proceeds to cite the concentration of media in France today, adding: "Isn't that censorship?" Another woman then says to the reporter: "You have to join us! Drop your microphone. Fight with us for utopias. There are still some left to defend." At this precise moment, the woman with the rifle above pretends to "act out" her threat to "kill that," pointing her weapon right at the camera—Commune TV's and *La Commune*'s—with the gun's barrel framed in the middle of the image. (See the sixth image of the visual essay at the start of this article.)



A woman holding a gun at the barricades shouts one of many critical comments to the former Commune TV reporter, highlighting his bystander status despite purporting to be an advocate of the Commune.



At the conclusion of a short interview with a Communard encouraging the reporter to put down his microphone and join the fight, a woman acts out her threat to 'kill that' – referring to media purporting to speak for the Commune, as represented by Commune TV or perhaps *La Commune* – by pointing a rifle right at the camera, its barrel almost exactly at the centre of the image.

The incredible power of any single media representation in support of the revolution is repeatedly remarked upon in different ways during the barricades sequence. One group of women proclaim defiantly to the reporter and camera: "The revolution is ours." Once more, considering the relative obscurity of films directly seeking to "re-tell" the Paris Commune events, they might well be leveling the comment at *La Commune*'s own disproportionate role as perhaps the most prominent film focusing on this event, its qualities and sympathies notwithstanding. Raising some pertinent points and questions, a young woman tells the former Commune TV representative:

> "We shouldn't talk to you. Your manipulation methods are those of National [Versailles] TV. We don't need to prove our ideas to you. Your role is a bit strange! Do you really broadcast what we say, what you're filming? Will people see this film?"

While essential, and very much characteristic of Watkins' cinema and writing, such media critique—including potential commentary on the film's own status—doesn't, however, entirely dominate the late scenes. More precisely, rather than myopic, it works within the context of a keenly felt political urgency represented by these events and their still challenging trans-historical relevance.

As the reporter moves on through the crowd, other figures shout a series of laments into the microphone. One man cries: "Oppression for poor nations; and for the poor in rich ones. We're human beings, shit!" Taking for granted that resistance is crucial, rather than stressing the image of the barricades (seen behind her), a woman says of our current predicament that there is no choice but to use the weapons of the media against their usual purpose: "We can no longer build barricades like this. We have to fight the media. We have to use the same weapons: computers, Internet, TV." By saying this, she effectively sides with *La Commune* itself as a gesture of revolutionary action on the virtual level of media as "reappropriated" from its more usual function. Also voicing a level of frustration and impatience reminiscent of Watkins' own frequently expressed position, she adds: "It's about fucking time!" Finally, after the government troops have completely taken control, as the camera whirls through corridors seeking to follow the fast-moving action while Communards are rounded up, the captured women in particular express their palpable anger. When asked her identity and former role in the Commune by an army commander at his ad-hoc desk, one of the schoolteachers—like other women—defiantly shouts her answer with furious pride. Of the broader question of *semaine sanglante* and its historical heritage, a man quietly lined up with others along a wall, presumably waiting to learn his fate, mutters somewhat optimistically: "They can't always hide what they did! They can't always lie." Considering that the perpetrator was one of the then most powerful Western states and that its victims would become largely erased from mainstream historical portraits of France and Europe, despite the efforts of various books, articles, and films, such a hopeful cry has yet to be fully answered.



Speaking with a present tense of 1999, one of the women at the barricades emphasizes the need for resistance to inequality and oppression by using the same tools employed by conservative forces, such as the mainstream media and the Internet, stressing the need for haste in bringing this more fully about.



Following the Commune's overthrowing, there is palpable anger amongst the



Standing in a row of Communards against a wall, presumably awaiting news of their

captured women in particular – such as one of the schoolteachers, seen here – who are abused by soldiers and defiantly shout their pride in the Commune and their roles within it when asked by the army commander at an ad-hoc desk.

eventual execution, one man rather optimistically hopes that this massacre by government troops upon largely unarmed civilians will not be hidden from history forever.

Taking in spatial and temporal factors while effectively describing the film's palimpsestic form, reaching its clearest enunciation in the barricades scenes but really operating throughout, Fujiwara writes that Watkins and his collaborators invoke a world way beyond any completed "text." What we see, rather, is

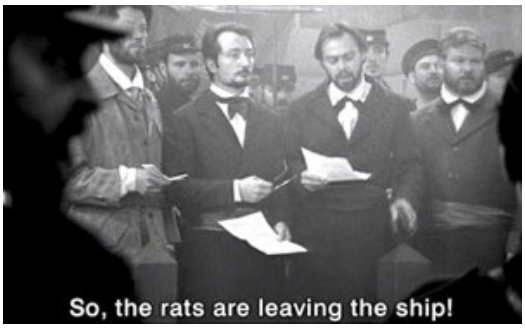
> "penetrated and saturated by voices alien to the image, coming from other 'scenes,' making it impossible to identify and bracket the scene as a separate unity within the flow of displaced images and sounds. Everything is mixed, combined, juxtaposed; there is no unanimity... [H]ardly a position is ever affirmed without eliciting a counterargument, a protest, or a catcall (indeed, 'it's difficult to be a democrat,' as a woman says in the film)."[93]

Not only do we always sense the theatricality and present-day staging of the Commune—or more precisely its articulation and consideration—by intimately engaged on-screen subjects, the performative and textual layers continue to bleed into one another more fundamentally. Present-day references increasingly feature in on-screen discussions, with people talking about the Commune in the past tense. And the film itself is increasingly reflected upon near its end—both events "past" yet very much "present." The scenes' temporality is forever unstable and not just because of slippage between character and actor.



Even near *La Commune*'s end it is unclear whether people are speaking "in" the film or somehow after its completion. Sometimes this plays out like footage from a "making-of" documentary, with the actors still in costume, which has slipped into the "main feature," such as when the group of women familiar from the dressmaker's, Women's Union, and other street scenes talk to the camera in a relaxed fashion about the Commune and their experience of the film, with no Commune TV microphones in sight. Such conversations come across very much like relaxing "after work" and reflecting on it. In other scenes, 1871 and the threat of Thiers' invading forces somehow remain very much alive despite references to the film's own era. The spaces on-screen participants occupy throughout such discussions remain both "diegetic" and always highly theatrical and unconvincing—usually just comprised of some old

After being told by a screen text that the next planned meeting of the Women's Union 'will never take place', we next see some of the same women and others from previous scenes relaxing and now speaking exclusively circa 1999 about their experience of the film and what it could mean.



While there is a diversity of image types across the film, the predominant one in relation to framing of human bodies and proximity to the camera is a kind of medium shot, which can be seen in both relatively sparse arrangements of bodies and (more commonly) very cluttered ones. Seen right across the film – as evidenced by nearly every one of the above images – via various formations, in this example Leó Frankel and other Commune leaders stand together in a group, with National Guardsmen behind them, to address a crowd while a man in the foreground mutters his discontent.

boxes, recycled furniture, and room dividers. The large yet subdivided and cramped environment—all of it technically interior while most often made to suggest exteriors—looks concurrently real yet highly artificial and "virtual." For a film that may seem monotonous when it comes to setting and mise en scène, this temporally effected space is from the start treated as multiple.

In addition to the palimpsestic space that constantly slips between time periods, never resting properly in one, staging of actors and shot composition tend to further enforce perceptual and temporal instability yet a sense of performative presentness. When it comes to the framing of human bodies, *La Commune* has a compositional style quite familiar from Watkins' other work. Although most of his films have relied mostly on television funding, they tend to eschew the usual tight close-ups of faces strongly associated with the medium in both its state-funded and commercial forms. But neither do the films feature distant "establishing" shots taking in the whole scene, as we get with many cinematic traditions from Hollywood and beyond. Instead, throughout the film recurs a characteristic kind of shot in terms of focal length and camera proximity to the action. Here the important human figures are positioned in a kind of middle-ground so that the viewer is able to see them clearly while also retaining a strong sense of their immediate spatial and social surroundings.[94] Especially during quiet moments in the film, we are aware of the warehouse set as a prominent presence, while at other moments the intimately social and political nature of this film-reality is intensely cluttered and claustrophobic such that human bodies make up virtually the entire mise en scène. The more people in the frame, the more internal discord within the Commune is registered. This goes for the film's majority, often rather chaotic scenes throughout. The middle-ground composition also applies when military commanders are addressing their forces or politicians try to speak to a restless crowd. One example of the latter instance is when Leó Frankel—one of the Commune's key social reform architects and the main historical leader portrayed in occasional brief scenes by the film—and other prominent figures stand grouped together (with National Guardsmen behind them). While Frankel tells a crowd of people why wages have seriously eroded, a man in the left foreground seen partially from the back mutters his disapproval: "So, the rats are leaving the ship!"

That long shots, so familiar to cinema and today even sometimes occasionally television viewers, would be unlikely or impossible in this film's warehouse set shouldn't distract us from the fact that both such images and the more usual TV-style close-ups serve no real purpose in Watkins' cinema. We are left instead with a kind of "in-between" medium shot-defined style featuring frames crowded with multiple bodies, a style made rather self-conscious in its ubiquity across *La Commune*, but also for the fact that various people dominate the image at a given moment as they frequently talk directly into the camera or at least momentarily glance at it. This aesthetic principle serves as an important nexus point whereby Watkins' formal and political ideals are given mutual expression. With such shots the viewer can briefly ascertain individual figures—not simply characters, or actors. Again, here we have a sense of the body reclaimed, both for itself and for the communal effort in which it plays a key part. These men and women on screen are always seen in their inherently social everyday context: a world they are both a product of and very much affected by. It is also a reality that together they can potentially impact and change, depending on the behavior of those around them and others outside the frame, both immediate and far away.

The mutability of this social positioning of bodies is emphasized throughout the film. We see different people clearly affected by others in the near vicinity, developing their own arguments and responses in relation to the discussions they listen to and take part in. And the changing events of the

Commune—and even the world beyond— are suggested by the colonial context crucially traced in *La Commune*. In addition to the multi-vocal performance of its extensive dialogue track, this bodily performance and the camera's in-between framing of frequently crowded people as always situated within a social space, ensures a multilayered presentation of history defined as collective, collaborative process.

Stressing memory, reclaiming subjectivity

Within, across, and beyond its temporal layers, *La Commune*'s mounting of a democratic performance in living history as textual heteroglossia, expressed, performed and framed as multiple processes, calls all its participants inside and outside the frame to a subjective responsibility. In this sense, as opposed to a more official historical accounting, the film's temporality invites the viewer to participate in a customized procedure that, I suggest, resonates with an idea explored by Sandy Flitterman-Lewis in her analysis of Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Brouillard/Night and Fog* (1955).

Addressing the audiovisual technique and ethico-philosophical address of Resnais' canonical short film about the Nazi death camps, Flitterman-Lewis stresses "memory" over "remembering." She defines the latter as "tied to a specific event," an "objective" monument that exists outside of individual involvement. Memory, on the other hand, is positioned as relying on subjective engagement and the contemporary playing out of history, only sustained through creative, individually reliant acts of dialogue and representation.[95] The result, Flitterman-Lewis suggests, is that

> "presence, responsibility, and active engagement make both viewer and filmmaker witnesses to history (and to historical representation), projecting the film's implications beyond the theatre and into the future, binding them in the social processes and moral obligations of human culture."[96]

With its layered reflexivity and blockage to any kind of "suspension of disbelief," using the events and tragic conclusion of the Paris Commune as a launching pad, *La Commune* asks us to bring our memory to bear upon history in its most alive sense, invoking past, present and future. While we may be impressed or even overwhelmed by the information, activity, and arguments filling the frame over its many hours, *La Commune* remains decidedly incomplete or even unconvincing if judged as an act of historical recreation or memorialising that asks us simply to "remember."

Flitterman-Lewis writes of the real ongoing importance of *Night and Fog* as a film as much about the present and the future as the past event it essays, filtered through the viewer's hopefully active engagement: "Recognizing that the 'truth' of an event always exceeds the documentary fact."[97] With Watkins' unique pseudo- and speculative-documentary form, we are asked to engage with the reality of ideas, debates, problems and historical narratives, while also acknowledging they cannot be transparently rendered to us. There must always be a messy process of constructed textuality and articulation that is inherently "subjective" both in its representational address (the filmmaker and his colleagues' views on the material) and reception. We are presented with a very possible real: an historical event that "did happen." Yet it is a highly theatricalized and multiply reflexive recreation of this past, "liberated" from the notion of history's memorializing narratives that inevitably ascribe clear winners and losers. While often a tragic history in the real world—here a "failed" revolution murderously quelled, later inspiring (along with the Russian Revolution) a key modernist opera by Marxist Italian composer Luigi

Nono, *Al gran sole carico d'amore* (*In the Bright Sunshine Heavy with Love*, 1975), and much other committed leftist art—the virtual rendering of key moments thereby gives them enormous virtual power beyond the familiar revolutionary lament for lost opportunities and idealism.

With memory thus conceived, the often contested concept of subjectivity becomes crucial as voiced both by the filmmaker in his refusal of the illusion (and ideological "trick") of an objective documentary address, but also beyond any singular authorial expression or that of the 220 actor-participants, and ultimately of the film itself, as a called-upon quality in urgent need of re-engagement. The unrepentantly subjectivist voice/s or "noise" characterizing the film renders historical reality in the form of a provocation. Rather than being forced to accept Watkins' or the film's understanding of what we see on screen, this cinema calls us into subjective accounting and responsibility in bringing to bear the lived history of film as an actively engaged event on both sides of the screen. "What do you think?" viewers are repeatedly asked.

Linda Williams writes of Errol Morris' celebrated documentary work featuring extensive, TV-style "recreation" sequences:

> "Some form of truth is the always receding goal of documentary film. But the truth figured by documentary cannot be a simple unmasking or reflection. It is a careful construction, an intervention in the politics and semiotics of representation."[98]

Peter Watkins' cinema is driven by the determination to express, explore and extol a sense of often bitter yet ultimately inspiring historical truth. He does this by presenting, generating, and engaging living history as textual process rather than mimetic representation. Critic Jared Rapfogel describes the director's style as akin to a complex enactment of the "newsreel" approach, which becomes "a way of making history come alive again." This aesthetic "both creates distance and collapses it."[99] We are given a possible real yet a sightly exaggerated reality either set just in the future or, as with *La Commune*, a highly theatricalized and variously reflexive recreation of an important past event. Such inherently "virtual" reality is brought to life by being liberated both from ultimately regressive regimes of "objective" or transparent textuality and the (frequently connected) ideologically closed, linear historical narratives of winners and losers. While the film often charts a loss in real-world history, the virtual rendering of key moments thereby gives it enormous power beyond the familiar leftist elegy for lost opportunities that effectively affirm history as a tragically closed book.

La Commune's unrepentantly subjectivist but importantly multiple voice mounts a resolutely contemporary provocation. This is not a cinema of revolutionary prompting through faithfully charting the historical and spatial reality of a sacred and mourned event, seeking to "remember" it, as so much "serious" narrative and documentary cinema and television continues to promote. Instead, the film achieves a multilayered, intensely active reflection on and engagement with history by bringing its challenge into the present through self-consciously artificial means—those of audiovisual form. Rather than the "dead" mise en scène of the period film, or expensive popular recreation-adorned documentary form, here a shoestring set and majority non-professional cast make for a cinematic and historical space perennially alive in its process of production. *La Commune*'s multi-vocal engagement and diverse articulation offer an uncommon but strikingly effective way to make serious films about history. It suggests that a lingering, tantalizing potential for reappropriation and production of revolutionary space remains, a space rendered as concurrently theatricalized and virtual. This is the inherent reflexivity, fragmentation and violence of space constructed and re-imagined through the moving image across time—both *La Commune*'s sheer duration

and, more crucially, for its complicated time travelling between 1871, 1999-2000, and since. Here cinema calls us into creative and subjective accounting and responsibility, bringing to bear the lived history of film as a fully activated event on both sides of the screen, with multiple unresolved implications for contemporary life.

Conclusion: everyday life meets virtual space, a conjurer's journey

"The diversion and reappropriation of space are of great significance," writes Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*. But, he adds:

> "Diversion is in itself merely appropriation, not creation—a reappropriation which can call but a temporary halt to domination."[100]

The Paris Commune was indeed a relatively brief and intensely localized, yet variously creative and enormously significant, "halt to domination" brought about by the attempted reappropriation of space but forcibly stopped short of its more complete revolutionary "production." La Commune portrays this event almost entirely "from below" at the level of everyday life, with extensive detailed and big-picture narration and analysis offered by both copious text screens and extensive human discussion throughout the film, no matter whether the text or human figures appear to be speaking in 1871 or 1999-2000.

This film is about, offers, creates, and produces, revolutionary history. Here is a palimpsestic history taking in its setting, period of production (including extensive preparation, brief shoot, and subsequent editing into a "finished" film), and beyond. It is articulated by everyday people (both the characters and largely non-professional actors on screen, most of whom knew little or nothing about the Commune but possessed distinct political opinions) who seek to transform everyday life and who support a revolution purporting to enable just this. While far from consistent or devoid of internal contradictions and significant ongoing problems—many of which have continued to challenge the thinking of radical activists, would-be revolutionaries, and diverse fellow travellers ever since—the Commune itself as an overall project was based on the general principle of enabling people to experience and create life anew at the most basic grassroots level in the form of a different social order than the one that had been long enforced by powerful class, state, gender, and religious elites and was violently re-established following the Commune's murderous cessation in late May of 1871. This historical event's radical experiment in democracy is taken up by a film primarily concerned with illustrating such an everyday process through its highly reflexive "reimagining" within a suburban warehouse for just three weeks in 1999—less than a quarter of the Commune's own short duration.

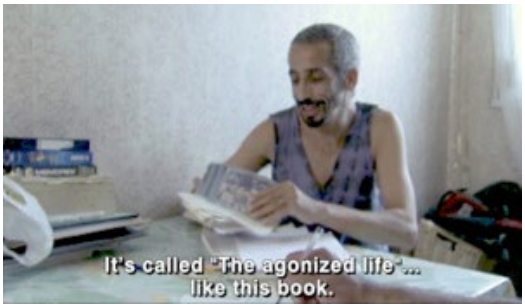
Such a unique, generative film-history is addressed, co-authored, and displayed throughout *La Commune* by on-screen participants and Watkins' multiply reflexive filmmaking choices with striking trans-historical force via multiple discussions, comparisons, and analyses interconnected through a forever unstable present tense, yet always based in a sense of the everyday. Following Nietzsche, Lefebvre argued that radical change can only conceivably occur at this quotidian level, unless we are to accept an always "top-down," inevitably repressive version of historical development. Daily life, Lefebvre writes in *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume III,*

> "is the 'base' from which the mode of production endeavours to constitute itself as a system, by programming this base. Thus, we

> are not dealing with the self-regulation of a closed society. The programming of daily life has powerful means at its disposal: it contains an element of luck, but it also holds the initiative, has the impetus, at the 'base' that makes the edifice totter. Whatever happens, alternations in daily life will remain the criterion of change."[101]

The fact of the Commune even having occurred, this microcosm of a would-be or not-quite revolution entirely played out within urban space, is ever more important to acknowledge and spotlight in light of our own recent history. It has much to teach us about the potential within this very prosaic sphere of daily life, wherein lies the "criterion of change"—the volatile "base" capable of making "the edifice totter." The space and time evoked by *La Commune* works to produce a very singular cinematic rendering of revolutionary history, with a crucial stress on present-day, everyday experience and use.

Kamel Ikachamene, an Algerian *sans-papier* resident of a Paris *banlieu* with a small part in *La Commune*, is interviewed in *The Universal Clock*. Offering not a single word to explain such a connection, the everyday yet magical spatio-temporal terrain traversed by those on both sides of the screen throughout Watkins' film is nonetheless evoked at once when Ikachamene picks up a nearly disintegrating book to quote from one of his favourite poems, "The Agonized Life," by Quebec writer Gaston Miron. He recites the lines:



An Algerian-born *sans-papier* resident of a Paris *banlieu* with a small part in *La Commune*, Kamel Ikachamene reads from a poem by Quebec writer Gaston Miron, 'The Agonized Life'.

> "Far from myself, I took a conjurer's journey.
> I hadn't seen myself for a long time.
> I'm inside myself, like a man in a house built in his absence.
> I greet you, Silence.
> I didn't come to come back.
> I come to begin again."[102]

On the one hand, for all those involved—both in 1999 and for subsequent viewers—*La Commune* amounts to a "conjurer's journey" indeed, an experience well and truly outside familiar everyday life. Yet, the Miron passage also suggests, at the same time there is a sense of a return, looking at the reflection of a self long unseen or unacknowledged.

The poem (which predates Watkins' film and to my knowledge has no other connection to it) also invokes the spatial, resonating with the fact that this film-revolution, staged within a massive subdivided interior space, appears as a kind of proper (if intensely theatricalized) "house" that has already been constructed in our absence. It feels like a home, but appears as if built elsewhere and by others, so seemingly alien is the on-screen occupants' dogged utopian commitment to it. And as to the quote's invocation of sound (or lack thereof), which I briefly addressed above, while the film is for much of its running time overflowing with "noise," it also offers regular, crucial passages of meditative silence often emphasized and accompanied by black or text screens. The whole film can be seen as allowing us to "greet" a figurative "Silence" that enables genuine reflection. It functions as a kind of distended mirror session with palimpsestic, hurtful yet forever inspirational history shorn of its usual centralizing, linear, and winner-defined stories. Miron's last two sentences, meanwhile, uncannily approach the very nub of what my discussion has chiefly been concerned with: the singular ability of the Paris Commune to time travel via this special filmic treatment. We don't come to return, to memorialize, or remember. But rather to apply ourselves, to face our intimate relationship with and responsibility to history—our very own, and that which we learn through engagement with *La Commune*—so as to think and "begin again."

La Commune (Paris, 1871) produces revolutionary history on film by

intimately and appropriately conflating everyday life and a virtual space that is thereby no longer temporary (unlike the production experience and process of the film itself). This virtuality remains intrinsically connected to the notion of "real" space and history as experienced by ordinary people and echoing across diverse periods. And the film's digital-era essaying goes beyond being a record of an apparently transformative but finite collaborative filmmaking experience. The result is not exactly the same as the production of space Lefebvre envisaged, one that largely predates the transformations and unprecedented network-defined nature of our increasingly online-oriented world (even as his later work starts to address the ramifications of the information revolution[103]). *La Commune*'s creative enactment, its rendering of revolution as an act of radical reappropriation—here itself of the theatricalized and virtualized space that usually constitutes the formally and ideologically conservative mediascape of film and television—now offers multiple renewed points of very real entry into and everyday resonance within our increasingly interconnected cities, concurrently real and virtual, right across the world.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 44 & 54. [return to text]

2. Watkins, 2014: online.

3. Taken from one of the copious text screens seen throughout the collaborative 2000 film directed by Watkins, *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*.

4. Readers primarily interested in discussion of the film may wish to proceed straight to Part II, which gains far greater theoretical-historical contextualization in light of Part I but nonetheless remains sufficiently coherent read on its own.

5. Lefebvre, 1991, p. 22.

6. As a result of this long relationship, roughly half of Lefebvre's written output was for Communist publishers. Upon eviction by the PCF in 1958—following many years' internal criticism for his comparatively unorthodox Marxism and insufficiently pro-Moscow views—Lefebvre subsequently remained a committed non-institutionally aligned communist to the end. [return to text]

7. "Enamoured with Louis Althusser and his school," writes Stanley Aronowitz, "the academic left largely ignored these [early translated] works because Lefebvre was a representative of the Hegelian-Marxist tradition that they were labouring to discredit." (2007, p. 134) The title of Aronowitz's article, "The Ignored Philosopher and Social Theorist: On the Work of Henri Lefebvre," suggests itself that any influence Lefebvre may have had in the Anglophone world has been sketchy and highly selective at best—despite that in many ways both his concerns and conceptual attitude if anything chimes increasingly better with our own in recent years, such as incorporating an ecological dimension into the humanities and political science. Lefebvre, of course, has his committed advocates in the English-peaking world, and his work has probably not been quite as marginal or misunderstood as Aronowitz implies. But the still very partial and rather fragmentary nature of its reception and lack of wholehearted adoption (as was enjoyed by other post-war French intellectuals I mention here and in the following footnote) remains notable.

8. In Australia, where I received my academic training in the Humanities, Lefebvre was never mentioned in classes (even as the roughly contemporary German "New Marxists" of the Frankfurt School were comparatively

prominent, if often as “elitist” targets for postmodern critique). This is in sharp distinction to the following generation of French thinkers we call poststructuralist, whose work dominated my university theory curriculum. Encountering Lefebvre much later provided an illuminating “corrective” to what even as a student I felt to be an excessive emphasis on—and, I later surmised, a rather depoliticized account of—Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and other French thinkers of the post-war generation initially drawn to Marxism but soon mounting a very successful Oedipal overthrow. Some of the footnotes in Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (1991) feature interesting, if sometimes glib, critiques of such poststructuralist stars at the early peaks of their fame.

9. Aronowitz, 2007 p. 133.

10. Aronowitz, 2007, p. 150, before quoting Lefebvre (1991, p. 128).

11. Historical film studies scholarship over the last three decades or more has often devoted quite some attention to the close relationship between cinema and “the modern city,” both of which enjoyed twin peaks of cultural, economic and political importance during the same historical period. Until the 1950s, cinema’s production and consumption bases were thoroughly urban in concentration, which for key Hollywood styles and genres—such as the gangster film, the thriller, and above all film noir—became crucially reflected onscreen. (It can be argued that Hollywood’s primary “rural” genre, the Western, was also largely urban in regards to both its target audience and escapist appeal as an often-reactionary critique of the modern capitalist United States and wage-labor from the perspective of a constructed pre-modern past.) Yet the odd reference aside, Lefebvre’s work has generally received little sustained attention within even this scholarship on cinema and the city.

12. Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 22–3. In addition to Marx, Lefebvre had a long interest in Nietzsche’s work, devoting an early book solely to the philosopher (1939) and another to Nietzsche, Hegel and Marx (1975).

13. This crucial notion of Adorno’s is most strenuously worked through as a philosophical concept in the magisterial *Negative Dialectics* (1991), originally published in 1966. For a brief, hopefully clear explication of Adorno’s understanding of and stress on negation and its ongoing usefulness, including in the perhaps surprising context of film studies, see Ford (2012, pp. 54-61).

14. Lefebvre, 1991, p. 23.

15. Lefebvre, 1991, p. 23.

16. Each strongly influenced by Hegel, both Marxist philosophers engaged extensively with Nietzsche for his substantive troubling of the idealist Hegelian tradition of synthesis. The connection is made even clearer in Lefebvre’s invocation of negativity. Adorno partially exempted Nietzsche from what the former argued was Western philosophy’s obsession with synthesis, the lingering spectres of Platonic and later German idealism forever resulting in ethico-political regression and justification of suffering. Such majority

philosophers, Adorno writes, “all have a *parti pris* for unity. It is in that fact that we discover philosophy’s uncritical complicity with civilization.” (2008, p.159)

17. Efficacious revolutionary change in the 20th Century usually started or was often primarily fought across rural environments in countries such as China, Cuba, Algeria, and Vietnam.

18. Lefebvre, 1996, p. 158.

19. Harvey, 2013, p. xvii.

20. Far from a selfless gesture, such temporary allowance of would-be revolutionary activity works to prove the political establishment’s liberal values, a useful propaganda exercise helping “justify” the endless invasions and occupations by the United States and other Western armies of, we are told, “pre-modern” countries in selective need of “liberation”.

21. This holds equally true today for radical forces of the far right in both Western and non-Western contexts—if, in fact, such distinctions can still be made—when it comes to the recent wave of so-called Islamic-based terrorism carried out by often Western-born citizens. “Islamic State” or “IS” (sometimes also called “ISIL” or “ISIS’) is usually associated with non-urban and symbolically pre-modern space, matching what we are told is its “Middle Ages” ideology, by our dominant media and political discourses. Yet even from the latter’s Western-centric perspective, the real “revolutionary” potential of this reactionary movement—which has previously enjoyed (and still indirectly does so via Turkey) substantial Western-aligned financial and military support, as well as being largely enabled as a result of the US-led invasion of Iraq was most significantly demonstrated in the streets of Paris on 13 November 2015, no matter whether the terrorists acted on “orders” from IS or were simply inspired by it. That most were born and raised in Western European cities highlights the trans-ideological importance of urban space to diverse revolutionary purpose no matter its ideological color.

22. Syriza ultimately negotiated a series of deals with the Troika, more explicitly with Angela Merkel’s German government, actually harsher than previous Greek governments’ agreements, which Syriza’s leadership and activists had sharply criticized—flying in the face of the early July 2015 “No!” national referendum result that both roundly rejected further austerity measures and the notion of Greece leaving the Eurozone. Syriza then reached a gradual détente with Greece’s creditors, shedding more left-wing supporters inside and outside the party and country, and winning a second national election in September. In mid-November Syriza publically backed widespread strikes against ongoing austerity measures—the very same measures enforced by the Syriza-lead government itself, demonstrating a kind of bizarre-yet-logical cycle.

23. As of September 2016, once again no grouping appears capable of forming a stable governing coalition in Spain at the national level, so that a third election remains quite possible.

24. Mike Bird, 2015.

25. The English-speaking world, meanwhile, has also seen some notable developments. In mid-2015 under new rules the membership of Britain's Labour Party elected Jeremy Corbyn, by most accounts the most leftist leader in its history—much to the chagrin of the still majority right-wing "Blairite" parliamentary membership and the UK media, spanning conservative and left-liberal variants. Enormously popular within the party's membership, its numbers skyrocketing in direct response to his leadership and overtly socialist policy transformations, in September 2016—following an internal leadership challenge resulting from an 80% vote of no confidence by majority Blairite parliamentary colleagues—he was was re-elected a second time by party members (now numbering half a million, according to Corbyn, more than any other European political party) by an even bigger margin. Even in the United States, self-proclaimed "socialist" Bernie Sanders—whose positions are seen as very centrist, even conservative, to outsiders—did unexpectedly well in state caucuses and primaries in the battle with Hillary Clinton for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination. Multiple polls in the first months of 2016 had Sanders ahead of Clinton as more likely to defeat Donald Trump or any of the other Republican candidates. The apparent resurgence (or in the case of the United States, rather unprecedented) and prominence in polls and thus-far partial political success of unusually left-wing political figures and parties—both old and young, radical and more moderate—across parts of the Western world has been, in each case, crucially helped or even partially enabled by sustained activist critiques noisily articulated across major city centers of an exponentially unequal socioeconomic reality, peaking with the often-vicious austerity measures enforced on populations since 2008.

26. Such activism is, of course, far from limited to cities. In November 2015, for example, events in France (as so often the case) showed that the agricultural sector remains more than capable of major disruption and protest, blocking tourist sites with farm machinery and dumping produce across highways. I thank *Jump Cut* editor Chuck Kleinhans for this observation.

27. Lefebvre, 1991, p. 109.

28. This should not be taken to mean Lefebvre was not also interested in addressing rural space. In much of his work, including *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre extensively analyses what he sees as the different "cyclical" temporality of rural life as compared to the violent, instrumental linear time (very much following Georg Simmel's very early 20th-century observations) of urban living. This often informs his own distinct critique of urban modernity itself, but also the often city-centric nature of self-proclaimed radical movements such as Surrealism and Situationism (both of which he was closely involved with for a time). "He was a prolific writer on rural social life," notes Aronowitz, adding that this has largely been ignored in most of the U.S. response to his work—especially for sociology, due to being "predominantly a study of industrial society for which agriculture is simply taken for granted and the countryside understood as a vanished civilization." (2007, p. 134). Nevertheless, following Lefebvre's move to Paris, in publications such as *La*

Proclamation de la Commune (1965), *Le Droit à la Ville/Right to the City* (1968), and *Production of Space*, special attention is clearly paid to the ramifications of urban space.

29. Harvey, 2013, p. xiii.

30. Harvey, 2013, p. xiii.

31. Brown, 2006: online.

32. Brown notes that Lefevre's own explanation for the similarities of his and the Situationists' work in this area was that they shared in extensive discussions on the topic prior to falling out. In this sense both analyses are collaborations of a sort. (Brown, 2006: online.)

33. Lefebvre, 1996, p. 130. Originally published in 1968, an English translation of *Le Droit à la Ville* finally emerged within a posthumous Lefebvre volume called *Writings on Cities* (1996), featuring many basic spelling errors. (The passage quoted above is from this original translation, forgoing Brown's added italicization.)

34. Harvey, 2013, p. xiii. Presumably he is evoking here a relatively traditional brand of Marxism, rather than the various, and often fragmented, left-wing movements that have emerged since the late 1960s often centered around issues such as anti-colonialism, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity—movements that have often had their most visible bases in urban centers—not to mention the "anti-globalization" protests of the late 1990s-early 2000s, and again the "anti-austerity" and broader left-wing activism since 2010.

35. Harvey, 2013, p. xiv.

36. Galloway, 2015: online.

37. Gilles Deleuze, 1986 & 1989.

38. Galloway, 2015: online.

39. Jameson, 1981, p. 102.

40. Galloway, 2015: online.

41. Naturally, countless other historical events and traumas have resulted in far worse death tolls and total suffering. My point pertains, rather, to Galloway's precise discussion of Jameson's idea, something of a generative transition between the two parts of this article.

42. Ross, 2015. Her book, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*, offers a fascinating account of the philosophical and political principles guiding the Commune and what became of key surviving figures and their ideas—those who spent the rest of their lives seeking at first to literally memoralize what happened (especially important during the period when there was a virtual ban on the Commune's recognition in France), and then find ways to develop further its underlying principles, seeking out new

contexts in which this might productively occur. McKenzie Wark (2015) offers a useful extension of and commentary upon Ross' discussion. Another account of the Commune's cultural significance and heritage, and the role of survivors and sympathizers in "commemorating trauma," can be found in Starr (2006). These sources all differ starkly from the version of the Commune we get win *La Commune*, which features prominent leaders and strategists hardly at all, in favor of concentrating on everyday people.

43. Readers confident in their familiarity with the history of the Paris Commune may wish to skip the next eight paragraphs.

44. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from *La Commune* are from these text screens.

45. The decrees that were actually enacted by the Commune's government in its brief life during official sittings were: separation of church and state; establishment of a secular, state-run education system; remission of rents owed during the siege; abolition of night work in bakeries; granting of pensions to unmarried companions and offspring of National Guardsmen killed in active service; free return of work tools and domestic appliances by pawnshops valued up to 20 francs pawned during the siege; deferral of commercial debts, and abolition of interest thereon; the right of employees to take over and run enterprises upon the owner's desertion (the latter nonetheless maintaining a right to claimable compensation); and prohibition of fines by employers on workers.

46. Mulhern, 2015: Online. Ross (2015) provides the most extended recent overview of this expansive, integrationist cultural-educational-social-labor agenda of the Commune, by charting the philosophical and political visions of key figures.

47. Aronowitz, 2007, p. 136. Lefebvre, Aronowitz later writes, "declares the merging of art and everyday life as exemplary consequences for reversing the reversibility of time that routines and repetition have wrought." (2007, p. 151.)

48. For both the Commune and the Church, Montmartre was clearly significant. The site where Government troops failed to take the National Guard cannons, the Archbishop of Paris—who became a martyr for the Church in its subsequent return to political and public influence—was also executed there by Communards.

49. During a televised speech to the National Assembly aired on "Versailles TV" in *La Commune*, following Thiers' announcement that a final peace treaty with Prussia has been signed (receiving much applause), he then adds that the Commune has been "causing havoc with our foreign relations." Specifically addressing Africa, Thiers continues: "I can say that the dangers threatening our colony have been partly averted," quoting with great approval a letter by the son of "one of our most valued Generals: 'I'm fine. Superb 8-hour battle. Al-Mokrani, head of the insurrection, killed stone dead.' Thus, gentlemen, the danger which threatened our beautiful African possession has passed, and will hopefully, in a few days, have completely disappeared." Much applause again

ensues. The viewer then reads on a text screen: “When the Commune is crushed, 100,000 soldiers leave for Algeria to suppress the Muslim revolt. … The resistance lasts until January 1872.”

50. Bullard, 2000, pp. 85 & 93.

51. The historical sketch of the Paris Commune I have provided is drawn from Ross (2015), Badiou (2010), Merriman (2014), Starr (2006), Shafer (2005), Horne (2004), Watkins (2014), the French documentary film, *La Commune des Paris 1871* (Cécile Clairval-Milhaud and Olivier Ricard, 1971), the Canadian documentary about Watkins and *La Commune*’s production*, The Universal Clock: The Resistance of Peter Watkins* (Geoff Bowie, 2001), and *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* itself. According to Clairval-Milhaud and Ricard’s film—largely made up of quotes from archival texts and historical scholarship, accompanied by extensive period sketches—following the final defeat, 26,000 Communards were taken prisoner, a thousand dying in detention. 36,309 sentences, 10,137 condemnations, 4,837 deportation orders and 267 death sentences were handed down by the national government in the weeks and months that followed. The film adds that Thiers’ forces, meanwhile, counted 877 fatalities throughout the period of the Commune. Readers seeking a relatively quick but more extensive and detailed online introduction to the Paris Commune than my own will find its Wikipedia page a useful entry point. Meanwhile, an online source offering original documents and contemporary writings by key Communards, as well as a timeline of events, can be found here: <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/paris-commune/index.htm>

52. Mehringl, cited by Benjamin, 2002, p. 788.

53. Marx, 2009: online.

54. “One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes'.” (See *The Civil War in France: Address of the General Council of the International Working Men’s Association*, 1871, where this point is further developed.) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 1872: online.

55. Marx, 2009: online.

56. Harvey, 2013, p. xvi.

57. For the fullest list I can find of these films, see here: <http://www.commune1871.org/?Filmographie-de-la-Commune-de>.
Meanwhile, the Commune provides important historical context for other, usually better known films, without comprising the chief topic or setting.

58. Kracauer, 1947, p. 5.

59. Benjamin, 2002, p. 904.

60. Of course, nothing is impossible to appropriate for the tourist market, with guided tours of key Commune sites available.

61. The film's immediate exhibition context is complicated. Watkins writes on his lengthy website page devoted to *La Commune* that La Sept ARTE, the large television network (well respected for supporting "serious" cinema and documentary work with limited commercial prospects) with the initial screening rights, finally premiered it "in the middle of the night" after initially refusing to screen the film at all, following which he claims it was effectively "banned." Of course, with the exception of hit programs, it is quite normal for a television work to receive no distribution beyond initial screening context (and possible non-prime time repeats). Less common is for the exhibition rights holder to initially refuse to show the work at all, only to eventually—following much harassment by the director (and threat of legal action)—finally agree to a single screening very late at night. This situation meant, the director argues, that there was no prominent discussion of the film, or, more importantly, any rejuvenated mass-public discourse about the Paris Commune, its legacy, and ongoing relevance. Watkins appears to have been rather unrealistic in his hopes (especially in light of his previous experiences in other national filmmaking contexts as I have described), especially considering the film's length, radical form and mode of political analysis.

But as detailed on his website, the film did in fact receive some additional exposure in France upon completion. Outside the one-off small-hours TV broadcast, he notes the film was screened at some French film festivals, plus at the Musée d'Orsay—which was also one of the film's credited production sources, hence qualifying *La Commune* as a partial "gallery work" —in Paris as part of an exhibition on the Paris Commune spanning March–June 2000. Based on these initial screenings, Watkins describes responses to *La Commune* as "very mixed. And since the film has not been shown to a wide audience, it is impossible to comment broadly on how the public has responded to this film. … The audiences have been either relatively small and generally very positive to the film, with most people staying to the end, or they have been much larger and with more mixed reactions, in which case usually about one third of the viewers leave part way through the screening." Despite this exposure, its director laments, the film's potential moment of national relevance was seemingly missed—though surely its tie-in with the Musée d'Orsay exhibition was a fortuitous and significant financial and public exposure advantage otherwise unavailable.

What Watkins really seems to lament is a familiar cry by radical artists: the desire for a large audience—the rather mythic "public" he speaks of—for work that will rarely if ever be sufficiently supported by the requisite commercial or state-funded institutions. Three years later the film was made available to see outside France for French and English speakers—where viewers knew about *La Commune*'s existence so as to seek it out—when a small New York-based company specialising in the distribution of radical documentaries released the film in its full cut on DVD with English subtitles. More recently it has appeared on YouTube, again in the complete version. Watkins' discussion of the film's full production and exhibition history, from which I draw the above material, and what he argues can be learned from this story, can be found here: <http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/commune.htm>

[return to text]

62. He writes on his website, with typical bluntness: “We are now moving through a very bleak period in human history—where the conjunction of Post Modernist cynicism (eliminating humanistic and critical thinking in the education system), sheer greed engendered by the consumer society sweeping many people under its wing, human, economic and environmental catastrophe in the form of globalization, massively increased suffering and exploitation of the people of the so-called Third World, as well as the mind-numbing conformity and standardization caused by the systematic audiovisualization of the planet have synergistically created a world where ethics, morality, human collectivity, and commitment (except to opportunism) are considered ‘old fashioned.’ Where excess and economic exploitation have become the norm—to be taught even to children. In such a world as this, what happened in Paris in the spring of 1871 represented (and still represents) the idea of commitment to a struggle for a better world, and of the need for some form of collective social Utopia—which WE now need as desperately as dying people need plasma. The notion of a film showing this commitment was thus born.”

63. A 220-minute cut was created by Watkins to better enable theatrical exhibition and increase the chances of a TV screening. A third, 300-minute version was screened on German television. Due to the 2003 DVD release of the full version, and its subsequent availability on YouTube, the long cut is happily most likely to have been seen.

64. Louis Auguste Blanqui was the most famous of the Commune’s radicals, something of a full-time revolutionary who despite living much of his life in jail commanded a large cell-structure organization of followers. Eugene Varlin was another radical socialist, and member of the First International. Louis Charles Delescluze was a radical journalist, revolutionary leader, and key military commander of the Commune. Élisabeth Dmitrieff was a young Russian émigré, feminist, and member of the First International, who spearheaded the Commune’s Woman’s Union. Louise Michel was a central Commune agitator, anarchist and schoolteacher.

65. While this is often implied, the Thiers footage is presented in 1.66:1, not “pillow-boxed” at the old television aspect ratio of 1.33:1 or 4/3, as the Versailles TV studio broadcasts are. It could also be “raw” TV footage, like the on-the-spot interviews by the Versailles TV reporter—also in 1.66:1.

66. Early in *The Universal Clock*, a Canadian documentary about Watkins and *La Commune*’s production, we see the latter telling some of his actors: “Don't be afraid to look at the camera. Not looking into it creates a distance, and it's not natural either.” (Bowie, 2001.)

67. There is a long tradition in France (and elsewhere) of using warehouse spaces and other unusual or disused locales for staging theatrical pieces, often with political themes. For example, Ariane Mnouchkine has been influential in staging such productions in these kinds of settings in France since the 1960s. Thanks to Chuck Kleinhans for this detail. Jacques Rivette’s marvelous first film, *Paris Paris nous appartient/Paris Belongs to Us* (1961)dramatizes

often doomed attempts to utilize such out-of-the-way spaces for rehearsal and potential theatrical performance.

68. Lefebvre, 1991, p. 25. [return to text]

69. These and other aspects of the film's multi-leveled reflexive aesthetic regime that I have been discussing suggest that while Watkins' approach loosely operates within a cinematic tradition of "political modernism," his cinema doesn't quite fit the familiar variants thereof as suggested by András Bálint Kovács in his ambitious and magisterial 2007 book, *Screening Modernism: European Art Cinema, 1950–1980*. Kovács argues political modernism in the cinema effectively takes two general paths, each with important sub-divisions (which he also maps), giving equal weight to both: the alternatively realist or ornamental long-take approach on the one hand, or a more consistently fragmentary and "Brechtian" style on the other (2007, p. 376). The most influential account of political modernism within film studies remains David Rodowick's (1988), which stresses especially the more Brecht-influenced reflexive form with special emphasis on verbal and written language for its ability to critique and deconstruct the suspect (because too emotionally and ideologically seductive) image. This argument has been effectively updated and extended by Angelo Restivo (2010).

70. For viewers with experience of activist history, such moments in the film may well be highly resonant for suggesting what Kleinhans called, in first responding to this article, "a kind of transformation of political consciousness through the vehicle of action." I thank him also for prompting the above comment about collective action.

71. "Today in France, 60 percent of women work in 6 professions which represent only 30 percent of the labour market," the viewer is informed via text. Following a cut back to the same meeting scene, another screen reads: "In France, 80 percent of all domestic work is done by women. This represents 3hr30 of work each day for a woman with children and a full-time job."

72. Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 166-7.

73. He shouts in response: "It IS negative information! They spent all day trying to decide what to call it." She retorts: "That's your opinion." He replies: "You know why? They thought it might scare people. Committee of Public Safety! Of course it scares people! That's Robespierre! Let's start recording again, maybe we can talk about what's going on now!" She insists again: "It's not our job," now looking completely away from her colleague with clear disdain.

74. If I am associating the film with recent urban-based activism since 2010 in this article, in 2000-2001 it would have been related to the very large so-called anti-globalisation rallies, most notably those in London and Seattle (both 1999) and Genoa (2001), which saw much-debated destruction of property by some groups and extensive police violence.

75. The more commonly applied phrase, "neo-liberalism," invokes a return to

an earlier, often mythical law-of-the-jungle free market model. But this moniker can serve to mask the crucial ongoing role of the state in ensuring the increasingly unfettered success of corporate capital at the expense of genuine "competition"—supposedly the fundamental value of a market system—often in the form of subsidies, tax loopholes, etc. Nothing demonstrates this better than the unprecedented bailouts of the biggest banks in the United States by the taxpayer, whereby the largest transfer of capital from the state to the private sector in history was undertaken with no strings attached.

76. In its final section, *La Commune* explicitly compares socioeconomic conditions between the film's setting and production era: "In 1870, the wealthiest 20 pc of the world population had 7 times the income of the poorest 20 pc. In 1997, this difference was 71 to 1. Today, the richest 20 pc share 86 pc of the world GDP, vs. barely 1 pc for the poorest. The world's 3 richest persons own more than the total GNP of the world's 38 least-developed nations, that is to say, 600 million people."

77. While at first the local priest is supportive of their action, we are told, the following day, "the region's authorities asked the Home Office to eject them. They justify lifting the inviolability of holy places, on the excuse of a foreign cult practicing in the church." Thus was born the subsequently familiar and fraught "*sans-papier*" distinction in France.

78. While there is frequent slippage between 1871 and 1999 throughout the film, the only time we see anybody appear in modern-day clothing is the brief glimpse of Watkins and his crew in the first shot.

79. In many of Watkins' previous films, his own rather upper-class "British English" speaking voice performs this role, frequently with some auto-critical reflexive function in regards to deconstructing "official" BBC-style objectivity (as happens, for example, in *Punishment Park*).

80. While a lot more could be said about Watkins' use of sound in the film, I thank Helen Groth for prompting me to think more about its role through her contribution to discussion following a seminar address in which I presented some of this article's material. (Research Seminar Series, Centre for Modernism Studies in Australia: University of NSW, 18 November 2015.)

81. Delescluze, cited in Benjamin, 2002, p. 790. Central protagonists of the previous century's French Revolution at its more radical edge, by 1871 the Jacobins represented this tradition within the Commune, as compared to other Communards seeking more complete, explicitly socialist revolutionary change. The numerical strength of Jacobins would be important as the Commune entered its "crisis" phase, as they pressed for centralization of power in the interests of enhanced "efficiency" and "security." In France today the term refers less to radicals than republicans in favor of strong central government control of the state (while in the UK, on the other hand, the word is often used as a derogatory term for radical leftists). A text screen from *La Commune* summarizes the diverse results thrown up by the Commune's initial elections: "Different political trends try to coexist inside the Council: 1. Supporters of the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui. 2. Autocratic Jacobins, who long for a return to 1789 and centralized power in Paris. 3. Socialists trying to

create a network of federated Communes." There were also, meanwhile, somewhat "in-between" figures such as Georges Clemenceau, representing the most conservative wing of the Commune but seen as a radical by Versailles. A member of the National Assembly, Mayor of the 18th arrondissement, and future French Prime Minister, Clemenceau tried to negotiate compromises between the Commune and the Assembly.

82. Benjamin, 2002, p. 789.

83. Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 289-90.

84. Ross (2015) and Wark (2015), and many others, have charted this impact of the Commune on Marx's later thinking.

85. Marx, 2009: online.

86. Chomsky, 2013: online.

87. Now more clearly speaking in 1999, they comment that the Commune taught France and beyond "what democracy was about, what it really meant." According to Watkins' claims about the film's casting, these women were chosen due to their conservative political views. Learning about the Commune and its murderous cessation seems to have shaken them—as discovering the horrific costs others have involuntarily paid for one's own particular, and deeply privileged, version of "civilization" should. The scene concludes with the women citing historical scholarship corroborating and detailing the government-ordered mass slaughter.

88. Fujiwara, 2008: online. [return to page 5]

89. Fujiwara, 2008: online.

90. I refer here not to the immediate threats and problems of the Commune, such as possible Prussian occupation or the desperate need to retain the National Guard cannon, but rather to the ambitions of the Commune program itself as I described near the start of Part II.

91. Louis in Bowie, 2001.

92. Indeed some of the director's previous films started out as educational projects undertaken within institutional contexts, such as *Fritänkaren/The Freethinker*, a project about August Strindberg and his historical context made with Swedish high-school students in 1994.

93. Fujiwara, 2008: online.

94. Thanks again to Chuck Kleinhans for prompting these observations.

95. Flitterman-Lewis, 1998.

96. Flitterman-Lewis, 1998, p. 215.

97. Flitterman-Lewis, 1998, p. 211.

98. Williams, 1993, p. 393.

99. Rapfogel, 2007: online.

100. Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 167-8.

101. Lefebvre, 2006, p. 41.

102. Miron, selected and spoken by Ikachamene, speaking in Bowie (2001). The English translation I provide is taken from *The Universal Clock*'s subtitles.

103. Lefebvre devotes some attention to the information revolution in *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume III* (at what was then its early 1980s peak), and then the posthumously published work, *Rythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (2004), which many commentators treat as the fourth volume in the *Critique of Everyday Life* series.

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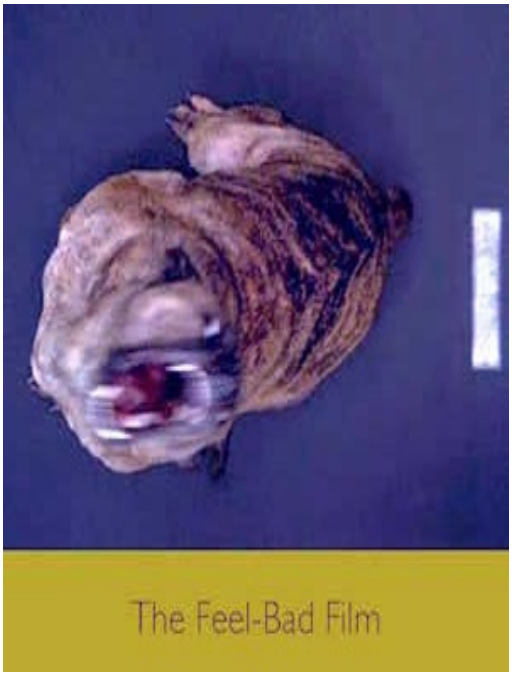
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The pedagogy of feeling bad

review by Roman Friedman

Nikolaj Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2015). 190 pages. $27.



Nikolaj Lübecker argues for the ethic of "feel-bad" films, movies in which desire for catharsis is built up but ultimately denied in a variety of ways. He draws on directors such as Lars Von Trier, Gus Van Sant, Michael Haneke, and many others.

We can avoid entering the inexhaustible debate over what is actually meant by Aristotelian *katharsis*, but we can at least go as far back as Rousseau who wrote of the theater:

> "In giving our tears to these fictions, we have satisfied all the rights of humanity without having to give anything more of ourselves; whereas unfortunate people in person would require attention from us, relief, consolation, and work...from all of which we are quite content to be exempt . . . In the final accounting, when a man has gone to admire fine actions in stories and to cry for imaginary miseries, what more can be asked of him?"[1] [open endnotes in new window]

Nikolaj Lübecker echoes this thought in his book, *The Feel-Bad Film*, when he writes of contemporary cinema that

> "the ordering of the problematic and painful reality, the stubborn desire to make sense of the world in such a way as to soothe or redeem, will invite us to forget the problems, and thereby result in an art that effectively embalms the situations it is dealing with."[2]

The "feel-bad film" can thus be an antidote to the stultification of popular cinema. Though aside from a few scattered remarks, Lübecker is not overly concerned with the problems of catharsis or entering the debate that Rousseau exemplifies. Perhaps he assumes that the reader is already somewhat aware of the conversation, for there is certainly no section or chapter set aside to specifically introduce the issue. None of that works against him however, since his concern is not with the potential harms of feel-good cathartic films but rather with the ethical potential in the uncomfortable and shocking films that have often been dismissed. Lübecker thus makes case studies of a number of movies throughout the book, including Michael Haneke's *Caché* and *Funny Games*, Lars von Trier's *Dogville*, Simon Staho's *Daisy Diamond*, Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, Claire Denis' *Les Salauds* and *I Can't Sleep*, Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers*, Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*, and many others. I will focus on only a few of these, those that I feel best summarize Lübecker's argument, and will introduce a few other films not present in his book.



Lars Von Trier's *Dogville*, where Grace kills Tom, the last living resident of the town. The movie not only assaults the viewer throughout, continuously causing discomfort through its confrontational mode, but it constantly builds the desire for catharsis up until the end. When it finally comes the audience is overwhelmed, the retribution goes too far, and catharsis is ultimately not achieved.

So what is a feel-bad film? Despite the moniker it is not simply a movie that makes the audience feel bad, it is rather one that

> "produces a spectatorial desire, but then blocks its satisfaction; *it creates, and then deadlocks, our desire for catharsis*."[3]



Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*, another "assault" picture. Two young men ingratiate themselves with a wealthy, vacationing family. They proceed to hold the family hostage, torturing them and playing brutal games with them for no perceptible reason except their own enjoyment. At one point the husband cries to his wife,

> "Let them do what they want. Please. Then it'll be over quicker."

The young man, Paul, responds by turning to the camera, looking directly at us, and saying,

> "Huh. That's cowardly. We're not up to feature film length yet. Is that enough? But you want a real ending, with plausible plot development, don't you?"

Shortly after, the wife manages to grab his gun and shoot Paul's friend. This potentially cathartic moment is denied when Paul finds a remote, rewinds the film, and prevents the wife from grabbing the gun.



In this first scene of Simon Staho's grim movie, *Daisy Diamond*, we are introduced to an abusive relationship between two drug users. Shortly after, we watch a rape occur, then hear a baby crying. In the height of our discomfort it is revealed that none of this is real, the two characters are auditioning for a role, and the crying baby who has interrupted the audition belongs to the young actress. This play between fiction and reality is a constant in the film, and plays on audience emotions very heavily.

Not horror or porn then, or at least not necessarily so. We can say that these movies destabilize the Hegelian ideal. If in Hegel the dialectic of mutual recognition in the Master-Slave relationship is meant to evoke "collaboration, a harmonious dialogue" of two different beings moving to recognize the other as self-conscious, then the

> "experience of watching some films is not one of freedom or recognition, but rather one of being humiliated and harassed."[4]

Even when we are not "forced into the position of the "slave" by the other (in this case the film or director) we remain in an

> "unpleasant position that can be associated with inferiority."[5]

Lübecker evokes this ideal in a Sartrean sense, as a kind of contract between artist and spectator wherein both are working towards self-consciousness. Here the Master-Slave relationship is replaced by one of Author-Reader.

> "[Sarte]...provides us with an exemplary theory about how the artistic experience stimulates a humanist ethics and a progressive, democratic politics. In this theory, art seems inherently ethical; it offers a model for democratic relations. Art is about communication, understanding, empathy, recognition, respect, reciprocity, democracy, co-creation and the understanding of oneself and the other."[6]

One might then assume that if such films destabilize this ideal, they are then inherently anti-humanistic and unethical. Not so for Lübecker. If anything he views these films as clearly part of the *Bildungs* tradition (a German concept suggesting self-cultivation, mastery, self-maturation that is intertwined with education, philosophy, and particularly humanism), and the educative potential of such films precisely lies in their ability to force the spectator into ethical, political, and social reflection. Arguing against the notion that such a disruption is unethical, he writes:

> "[T]he inclination to consider the artistic experience as a more or less direct model for social relations...must not be the only way to think the relation between art and society; in fact, this idea of 'art as model' can have unfortunate consequences. If we require the relation between film and its spectator to be similar to relations of intersubjectivity more generally, we rob ourselves of the possibility of experiencing and negotiating a relation to that which is ethically problematic, we deprive ourselves of a possibility to think the human psyche in all its complexities. That possibility, however, is one that art has always been keen to take advantage of, and I believe it can be detrimental to the process of enlightenment if we eliminate or reduce it."[7]

I will return to this idea of pedagogy at the end of the essay, but first we must examine what these feel-bad films are, how they work, and some ways in which they have us consider these complexities of the human psyche.

In Part 1 of the book Lübecker deals with "Assault" films, the first of three categories of feel-bad. These are confrontational and antagonistic, working by provocation and emotional identification. They deadlock catharsis by walking a fine line between the distance suggested by Brecht and the complete immersion desired by Artaud and Bataille that might lead to the production of new subjectivities.[8] Of Artaud and Bataille, Lübecker writes:

> "Inspired by Nietzsche, they rethought the desire for catharsis as a ground for the production of revolutionary subjectivity. For Artaud

Lübecker writes,

> "Aggressive reflexivity is taken to an extreme. Staho exhausts his spectators by constantly soliciting strong emotional empathy…it is almost as if the director taunts us to give up on empathy (for how long will *you* keep on caring?) while at the same time satirizing a society that is precisely lacking in empathy toward the young protagonist (when will you be just like them?)." (Lübecker, 36-37)

> and Bataille the emotional and physical immersion of the spectator was a precondition for the production of a new form of subjectivity; only by taking a step beyond the intellectual address and appealing to the body of the spectator would it be possible to liberate the public… [they] attempted to provoke and overwhelm the spectator (or reader) in the hope that he or she would emerge revitalized from the ritualistic experience…we thus find a strong correlation between immersion, transgression, and emancipation"[9]

There is thus a middle ground between the Brechtian distancing of, say, a Godard film like *Made in U.S.A.*, and the complete cathartic and subjective immersion of some feel-good movies, perhaps something like *Life is Beautiful*. The cathartic deadlock here does not have to be merely denial or lack of catharsis. In *Dogville,* director Lars von Trier builds up the need for catharsis and seemingly satisfies it, but ultimately overdoes it to the point of parody, ultimately blocking that cathartic feeling. The film is almost Brechtian in its setup, with its invisible creatures (a dog we have to imagine) and lack of sets (walls, houses, and doors are displayed via painted lines on the floor, for example) we are immediately told that we should be aware we are watching a movie. Nonetheless, the film manages to suck us in, to allow us to forget despite it all.

Grace, a stranger who arrives in the little town of Dogville while fleeing her dark past is eventually wronged and abused by all the town residents who take advantage of her delicate situation. She finally exacts her revenge at the end, but the cruelty goes a bit too far for the audience when not only is the town burned to the ground, but even the infant children are brutally murdered.[10] If emotional identification leads us to a cathartic moment and to the illusion of action, what Megan Boler calls the "harmonious experience of reversibility and the pleasure of identification,"[11] then these movies push us to ethical reflection by forcing us, through an analysis of the dissatisfactions with our viewing experience, to examine our "inner bastard."

Of course other films, including feel-good cathartic ones, can be thought provoking and can have us reconsider our moral frameworks without producing unpleasantness, without assaulting our bodies. With highly ethical and political cathartic films (say, *Hotel Rwanda*) there is the danger Rousseau pointed to, that though we may feel injustice and question our moral nature, the act of viewing the movie has us feeling as if we have already taken action, and have thus resolved the ethical dilemma induced. Non feel-good but still thought provoking films, say those of Bergman, may perhaps leave us considering these ideas in too intellectual a space, having not swayed us as emotionally as either the feel-good or the feel-bad. Lübecker however has one more important distinction to make:

> "Unpleasure is one of the things that make it reasonable to give the feel-bad films the freedom they need to explore a number questions that would be seen as problematic outside the cinema. The fact that these films produce unpleasure not only provokes us and makes us reluctant to trust the director (sharpening our critical apparatus), it also helps to maintain a distance between the world and the movie theater."[12]

This is a refrain that repeats constantly throughout the book, the importance of keeping the distinction between the theater and the world, and the fact that these movies provide us with a space to explore specifically dark, horrifying ideas that we never could in the real world. (It is also worth noting that Lübecker does not buy the argument that such films inspire forms of perverse behavior).

In Part 2, "Unease" films also work via manipulation, but they combine menace

with indeterminacy to create cathartic deadlock. Here Lübecker draws on Judith Butler's notions of "scenes of address" and "unframing." If the Hegelian scene of recognition is where "subjects face other subjects, negotiating relations of intersubjectivity, passing judgments on each other, becoming aware of themselves as subjects," then the "scene of address" is situated below that, where we negotiate the "less clearly defined elements that help establish the 'layout' of the scene" such as "gestures, body movements, and voices."[13] The key point here is that we have no clear notion of subject-object relations and we are so bound up with one another that we can never fully know ourselves. By frames Butler refers to the norms and structures that determine the "field of visibility."

> "[T]he repetition of particular forms of framing helps to consolidate and/or produce the norms that govern the criteria that determine which lives are deemed worthy of recognition."[14]

She suggests that the task for visual culture is to unframe or "expose how framing is done…how bodies and subjectivities are being constituted in the process" of organizing our visual experience.[15] Thus these "unease" films tend to have overtly political and ethical subject matter but deny the spectator any ability to make judgments, narratively but more importantly, visually. Movies that are inherently political in topic are denied the usual politics and ethics, meanwhile the visual field denies direct understanding of subject-object relations.



Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*. These movies of "unease" deny our catharsis not only by refusing to offer us answers to inherently political and ethical topics, but through a variety of cinematic techniques, sound and visual, that deny us access to the subjective space of the character. Here is a typical type of shot from the film, where we follow characters from behind as they wind around the school premises, almost with them, in the same space as them, but never quite there.

In Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, made in the wake of the Columbine High School massacre, we follow students around for the day as they walk throughout the school interacting with one another. They are unaware, though we already suspect, that the day and the movie will end in two students opening fire on their fellow classmates and teachers. No real explanation is given for the high school shooting. Indeed, explanations are teased in the background to be dismissed and forgotten (we are aware that the two perpetrators are bullied by jocks, and that there is some intimacy between the two males, however, we are also teased with violent video games, movies, and music as unexamined items on the periphery). Moreover, the cinematic techniques toe the line between subjective and objective, never quite giving us the satisfaction of identification and thus turning a potentially cathartic moment (the violence at the end of the film) into a banality. These movies are precisely about our denial of access to others, and being caught between these multiple perspectives is what creates the unease.[16]

Some filmmakers have stated that the use of these techniques is purposefully employed to create this kind of subjective position and to deny the typical feel-good experience. László Nemes' *Son of Saul* is perhaps too recent a film for Lübecker's book, but it draws some parallels to *Elephant*. The film depicts Saul, a Jewish prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp who attempts to obtain the body of his recently dead, illegitimate son in order to give it a proper burial. The film uses long takes, avoids a soundtrack, and has the camera follow near Saul as we watch him stoically perform his duties. Nemes stated that part of the purpose of the film was to provide a new type of film grammar for the Holocaust movie genre, to avoid the cathartic, highly emotional Hollywood rendering. Speaking to *The New York Times* he singled out *Schindler's List*:

> "Instead, Mr. Nemes (pronounced NEH-mesh) said, he wants to go against the reductive didacticism of television, which he finds rampant, and use film to explore ambiguity. Today, he said, there's a tendency 'to make sure that the audience understands continuously and totally, so that means that there's no more journey for the audience, nothing is hidden, everything is explained.' He added, 'There's nothing magical about it.'[17]



While László Nemes doesn't use the same type of tracking shots in *Son of Saul* as in *Elephant*, a variety of other techniques create a similar type of confusion of subjective space. Saul is nearly always in the camera's space, often in close-up with shallow focus that obscures the details of what is actually occurring in the camp, creating distance for the viewer. In this scene Saul and his fellow prisoners are dragging the naked

bodies of the dead, though we can barely make out the details beyond Saul's face.

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As David Bordwell has pointed out, this notion of totality and causality in classical cinema does not even have to lead to closure, but only what he calls "closure effect" or "pseudo closure."[18] [open endnotes in new window] What he means here is that though we are led along the movie causally, we don't actually need everything to be resolved in a logical sense, rather we just need to *feel* like everything is resolved (guy gets the girl, villain is dead, etc.). This suggests that part of the feel-good rhetoric is not only that we are led along narratively, but affectively as well. This may be especially true of the Holocaust genre, and hence what Nemes is reacting to. In *Son of Saul*, while the placement of the camera behind the character is not as frequent a motif here as in *Elephant*, there are other methods that create a similar effect. In particular, the use of incredibly shallow focus combined with the fact that the camera is always closely on Saul, produces the effect of being with the character yet simultaneously distanced from the events occurring on the screen.

It might be worth noting at this point that Lübecker selects only specific films from certain directors, and does not discuss their oeuvre. Thus, while he draws a great deal from *Elephant*, he (rightfully) does not discuss other Van Sant films such as *Good Will Hunting* or *Finding Forrester*, both of which might be in the "feel-good" category and do not employ these same techniques so vividly. While he draws on Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* in Part 3, he does not discuss the more recent *P'tit Quinquin*, which if it is not feel-good, certainly seems to veer closer to it than feel-bad. Likewise, Michael Haneke's *Caché* and *Funny Games* are examined, but not *Amour*. It is left to the reader to determine what this means for the filmmakers' broader intentions.

Lübecker's analysis of "Transgression" movies in Part 3 is a reaction to James Quandt's critique of contemporary avant-garde films, specifically those of The New French Extreme: if earlier avant-garde films were explicitly political and redemptive, these new movies, says Quandt, are nihilistic, they rely on sex, violence, and brutality for shock value and are a

> "narcissistic response to the collapse of ideology in a society traditionally defined by political polarity and theoretical certitude."[19]

Quandt is referring to films by François Ozon (*See the Sea*), Gaspar Noé (*Carne*, *Irreversible*), Catherine Breillat (*Romance*), Coralie Trinh Thi (*Baise-moi*), Claire Denis (*Trouble Every Day*), Bruno Dumont (*Twentynine Palms*), and others. The essence of Quandt's argument is that while shocking films in the past were fueled by authentic outrage, films such as *Salò* or *Weekend*, these new films present an

> "aggressiveness that is really a grandiose form of passivity."[20]

But for Lübecker it is precisely that these desperation films deny a link between transgression and emancipation, thus deadlocking catharsis, which makes them political and ethical. By not offering a position these movies communicate the despair over the collapse of vehicles for liberation and liberal outrage, either sexual, social, or sacred. This can be done by refusing to turn the transgressors into heroes.

For example, in Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*, a film chosen specifically by Lübecker as a case study in order to respond to Quandt, we watch as David, an

American, and his girlfriend Katia, a Russian, drive across the California landscape in a road trip. Neither speaks the other's language, so they communicate in French, which neither knows well. For nearly two hours we watch them fight, have sex, and try to converse with one another against the pale and dreary desert. While at times the tensions rise, the movie is for the most part languidly paced and nothing seems to develop. In the final moments of the film, in



The final shot in Bruno Dumont's *Twentynine Palms*. A police officer discovers David's naked corpse in the California desert. In the scene prior David stabs his girlfriend Katia to death. We are given no justification, no sense or meaning, only madness and despair.

a sudden turn of pace, we watch as David is violently raped and beaten while Katia is forced to look on. This scene is shocking enough as it is, but the truly haunting moment comes shortly after. In a regular film we might be left with characters who examine what just happened, or perhaps a general seeking of justice, maybe an epiphany…something concrete we can latch on to. In Dumont what we get is madness, a complete loss of meaning, and the consequent despair. Back in the motel room David emerges from the bathroom after having shaved his head in a bloody mess. He stabs Katia to death, runs out, and the movie ends with us seeing a policeman find his corpse in the desert.

Of the films Lübecker examines this is perhaps the feel-worst of them (at least for me). Yet this category of films and the effects produced on the viewer are also possibly the most difficult to describe on paper. It takes nearly two hours of us watching David and Katia drive and quibble in order to really feel the despair at the end. Technique is important here, pacing and visual style, and it is a possible way to undercut any emancipatory energy, such as through the use of repetition to make even transgression ultimately boring.



The lead characters humping trash cans in Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers*. These minor acts of transgression, though perhaps initially uncomfortable, become mundane through repetition. By the time we see any serious transgression occur, such as the dead body about thirty minutes into the film, we just no longer care.

For example, in Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers* we watch as a group of elderly individuals engage in a series of delinquent acts. They hump trash cans and masturbate, they vandalize and trespass, they drink and curse, they destroy infant dolls, and so on. The scenes are initially uncomfortable, partially because of the grainy video format, partially because of the disturbing makeup and prosthetics (the elderly gang is played by Korine and others of around the same age). However, quickly enough all this becomes dull, and watching the movie becomes an exercise in patience, no longer because of any discomfort but simply because it is tiresome. By the time we get to seriously transgressive moments later in the movie (dead bodies, prostitution, truly violent acts and sadistic speech), we no longer care. These moments have become just as mundane as the rest.

Such techniques have been previously employed by Korine in films like *Gummo*, where the strange meets the tedious. His latest, *Spring Breakers*, is perhaps more difficult to pin down. A highly sensory experience of partying, violence, robbery, and sex, the film follows a group of girls who head to St. Petersburg, Florida for spring break. This film perhaps falls more in Lübecker's first category, that of "assault" films. If there is discomfort to be found here, it is in the highly sensationalized and overly excessive MTV-like imagery.



Excess in Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*. Money, guns, drugs, and sex permeate nearly every scene. The four female leads are almost always dressed in bikinis, whether they are partying on the beach, getting arrested, or appearing before a judge in court. Dialogue, often highly sexualized to an uncomfortable degree, is at times intercut with close-ups of money, guns, flesh, etc.

Lübecker's ideas are much more nuanced than the summary given above, and one would have to read the book in its entirety to get at all its facets. Much is packed into a slim paperback. He draws on a number of other films and examines several other theorists and philosophers, some in depth, some too briefly, that I have decided to exclude here. Among those that may be familiar and have not been mentioned: Jacques Rancière, Roland Barthes, André Bazin, David Bordwell, Paul Gilroy, Jacques Lacan, Christian Metz, Martha Nussbaum, and so on. Despite my omission of some aspects of his work, I wish to move on and concentrate on four questions that Lübecker himself raises and ones I believe remain ambiguously answered:

What is a feel-bad film? On the one hand, this is a question directly answered in the first few pages as a term that "simply" refers to the production of strong cathartic desire that is then deadlocked.[21] Yet as we go through the three categories of feel-bad, rather than narrowing this concept down it seems to broaden. The movies are confrontational, but can also be non-confrontational.

They may require emotional identification or lack it. They could be extremely violent yet also unbelievably boring. A genre can of course encompass all of these (if we consider feel-bad as a type of genre), so why is this important?

A majority of movies Lübecker chooses have overwhelmingly poor reviews from both critics and regular viewers. While such criticism (especially popular criticism) is certainly not the gold standard of artistic merit, and while Lübecker himself highlights the poor reception of these films, one begins to wonder where judgments of quality enter into the conversation. Indeed, Lübecker's analysis doesn't seem descriptive, he seems be quite fond of all these films while simultaneously claiming that a discussion of the genre is not a discussion of quality, that to say something is feel-bad is "neither a compliment or an insult."[22] The closest to criticism is his analysis of Brian de Palma's *Redacted*, and even here it is unclear if he only views it as a failure within the feel-bad genre or generally. This is a difficult position to take without further explanation, to assert that a film is highly ethical and humanist but that such assertions are divorced from claims of quality. Moreover, without a tight conception of the new term does this allow us to say, for example: "No, you just didn't get it. It wasn't a *bad* movie…It was a *feel-bad* movie." Or, could a film succeed as a *feel-bad* film but fail as a *film*?

Why should a director choose to make a feel-bad film? In one sense he does answer this. Feel-bad films are filled with ethical and political potential, with moments of spectatorial self-examination, with critical awareness. Yet as mentioned in the previous paragraph, these movies are also largely negatively received. In fact, most of the general public does not watch them, or even know they exist. Those who do leave the theater unable to explain the director's intention or worse, like Quandt, they view the movies as nihilist and explicit trash. It is possible that the educative potential of these films work on the viewer's unconscious for some time after, but I see no clear reason to suggest that this is true. What Lübecker fails to provide is a reason why these directors should choose this method over the popular one, particularly if the intention is in some way educational and yet no one seems to get it. The very existence of Lübecker's book, it's argument for the value of the feel-bad film, seems to suggest this is so. (I could give you all the wonderful reasons that you should serve liver as your principal Thanksgiving dish. But if I haven't told you why liver is better than turkey, and you know that most of your family doesn't like liver, why would you make it?)

One potential answer is that these directors do not make such films with some educative value in mind, but rather make them because they are artists, because they want to push boundaries, make us squirm, do something new or simply garner controversy. It is hard to watch a movie like *Twentynine Palms* and come away feeling as if Dumont's goal at the outset was pedagogical in some way. However, this is not the stance Lübecker takes. Instead he offers evidence in the form of interviews and analyses suggesting that the educative part is intentional. He does this more for some films than others, and is at times quite convincing (particularly with von Trier). Nonetheless, if he is right, then the question above remains. If he is wrong, if pedagogy is often in no way the intention, then it seems to be just happenstance that a positive ethic coincides with a specific uncomfortable film, and it becomes quite subjective. We may very well begin to tumble closer to Quandt's view of things, seeing the humanism or nihilism depending on our own personal world view, optimist or pessimist.

Why have there been so many feel-bad films in recent years? Lübecker suggests how current avant-garde experiences differ from previous ones, and how these ultimately take shape in the feel bad film. He seems to communicate that the realm of optimistic liberation is in the past, and the best these movies can do is highlight the collapse of the liberatory field, hoping to project this despair into

political, ethical insight for the future. Lübecker's analysis of this, mostly concentrated in Part 3 of the book, seems sparse, and rightfully so, for the ideas would probably take a separate work to fully espouse. Nonetheless, though the essence of what he is saying is comprehensible, since he draws on a variety of thinkers in so quick a space the theoretical details remain muddled. In short, however, the point is that in the past avant-garde and shocking films (perhaps such as Pasolini's *Salò* or Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*) implied that transgression and emancipation should be linked, and hence there was a particular political or ethical project for us.

These new films suggest that we are in a cultural space where the clear link between transgression and emancipation has been severed, and the only thing we can do now is explore the distance between the two and communicate our desire for a project, any project, without necessarily suggesting what that project should be. The problem is this doesn't really answer the question as to why the field has changed. Again, such a question is of course outside the scope of the book and would require an intense social and historical analysis, at least if what Lübecker hints at is true. Still, a few suggestions or even footnotes to direct the reader would have been useful. If a particular thinker has given a complete treatment of this specific question, a reference with that note would have been useful. As it stands no satisfying conclusions are provided. What really has changed in the last twenty years that has motivated this shift in film?

In particular I wonder if Lübecker has not over-complicated his analysis in regards to this question. One glaring omission, and what seems to me a much simpler answer, is the impact of home entertainment for film viewership, beginning with the rise of video and expanding to streaming services today. The timeline fits perfectly with the initial rise of the feel-bad film with VHS, and the rapid proliferation of such films with the rise of DVD and internet. It seems much more reasonable that such films would be a response to the increase of feel-good experiences now available so freely at home rather than any complex reaction to liberatory potential. Though another question may help with this: is it just Western/European society that has experienced this change? The case studies chosen seem to suggest that this is so.

Why should we teach feel-bad films? [23] Lübecker makes clear that these films are humanist, that they can potentially expose the frames that bind our worldviews, and that they problematize the idea of restorative art. It is however the word "teach" that lingers and remains unanswered. Who is the "we" here, and who are we teaching? The question as phrased implies two parties and suggests that the teacher here is neither the artist nor the film. This is a wonderful book, one that I will return to and one that brings a distinctive framework to the examination of a unique film type. It has certainly helped clarify my own thoughts related to what I might now refer to as the "feel-bad film."

Despite any criticism here, I am in agreement with Lübecker that in some sense these are films that should be taught. Yet I too do not know exactly what it means to teach these films. Are we, for example, to include them in a curriculum? Or perhaps this is a call for the study of criticism generally? Have I personally been taught, but only now that I've read his book and rewatched the films? It is this question, perhaps unjustly, that remains with me at the end of the book, and one I hope Lübecker returns to.

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Notes

1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Letter to D'Alembert, and Writings for the* Theater, trans. Allan Bloom, Charles Butterworth, and Christopher Kelly (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England), 269. [return to text]

2. Nikolaj Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 162.

3. Ibid., 2.

4. Ibid., 167.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 9.

7. Ibid., 12.

8. Ibid., 27.

9. Ibid., 23.

10. For a more thorough summary, a link to the wiki: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogville.

Megan Boler, "The Risks of Empathy: Interrogating Multiculturalism's Gaze," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook* (1994), http://web.archive.org/web/20060224072305/http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/94_docs/BOLER.HTM

12. Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film*, 171.

13. Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film*, 80. The reference is to Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2005).

14. Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film*, 81.

15. Ibid. The reference is to Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (London, UK: Verso, 2009).

16. Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film*, 69.

17. Rachel Donadio, "In 'Son of Saul,' Laszlo Nemes Expands the Language of Holocaust Films," *The New York Times*, December, 134, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/15/movies/in-son-of-saul-laszlo-nemes-expands-the-language-of-holocaust-films.html?_r=0.

18. David Bordwell, "Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures" in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader,* ed. Philip Rosen (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), 22. [return to text]

19. Quandt quoted in Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film*, 122., reference to James Quandt, "Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema," in *The New Extremism in Cinema: From France to Europe*, ed. Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 25.

20. Quandt, "Flesh and Blood," 25.

21. Lübecker, *The Feel-Bad Film*, 5.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 12. The question is written exactly this way.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Historical avenues to critical border thinking

Review by Kin-Yan Szeto

Tony Williams, ed., *Postcolonialism, Diaspora, and Alternative Histories: The Cinema of Evans Chan*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015. Two DVDs, 200 pg. Distributed by Columbia University Press, $79.



To Liv(e): Rubie (Lindzay Chan) and John (Fung Kin Chung). "*To Liv(e)* was inspired by actress Liv Ullmann's 1990 visit to Hong Kong, where she decried the forced deportation of 51 Vietnamese refugees. This, coupled with the Tiananmen Square the year before, contributes to a dark cloud of apprehension that shades this film as the British Crown colony faces imminent takeover by China in 1997. Made for a mere $150,000, *To Liv(e)* is filled with the kind of style, performances and ambition one might expect from a film critic turned filmmaker, and for which no apologies need be made. [...] With a painter's eye in capturing the bohemian fringe of the Hong Kong art scene, and the mature voice of a seasoned filmmaker, Chan examines love, family and the fate of Hong Kong, and the culture clash between East and West with equal depth and assurance."—*The Hollywood Reporter*
[Image captions by Man Man Kasey Wong]



Datong: The Great Society focuses on modern China's first major utopian philosopher and earliest constitutional reformer, Kang Youwei (Liu Kai-chi) and his pioneering feminist daughter Kang Tongbi (Lindzay Chan). Kang and his daughter fled into exile for 16 years following the

Tony Williams' edited volume, *Postcolonialism, Diaspora, and Alternative Histories: The Cinema of Evans Chan*, provides a survey of this influential art cinema filmmaker's work. Hong-Kong-born Chan is a New-York-based author, filmmaker, and playwright whose works crisscross cultural, disciplinary, and socio-political borders. Seven scholars provide essays on Chan's documentary and feature films and deal with his oeuvre with diverse critical perspectives. The book concludes with an interview with Chan and contains two DVDs including five of his most important works. In this collection of essays, the contributors manifest the important links between Hong Kong, Mainland China, and the United States in Evans Chan's films. Blending melodrama and minor cinema alongside with documentary and fiction, many of Chan's films display, assess and reflect on modern/contemporary Chinese history, in particular Hong Kong's political transformation before and after 1997. I met Evans Chan several years ago at an academic film conference. We share Hong Kong's transitional recent history and the cosmopolitical experience of living in the United States.

Chan's films usually document a more complex public history through the lens of individuals. In his well-regarded 1992 feature *To Liv(e)*, for example, Chan shows how Hong Kong's geopolitical position was greatly affected by the changing global and regional political orders—a fact that is still very pertinent to Hong Kong today. The punning title takes the incident of Swedish actress Liv Ullmann taking the occasion of a visit to Hong Kong to criticize the local administration's deporting of Vietnamese boat people. Set between the 1989 Tiananmen Square events and the impending 1997 Handover, Chan creates a family melodrama set in a global span of countries.

Chan's more recent feature docu-drama, *Datong: The Great Society* (2011), presents a powerful and challenging perspective in understanding Chinese politics and history with the case of Kang Youwei an artist/philosopher/intellectual who tried to revive the Confucian utopia as a way of modernizing the imperial monarchy at the turn of the 20th century.

In the introductory article, editor Williams points out how Chan brings together Eastern and Western sensibilities in what Hamid Naficy has defined as "accented cinema" (11). The introduction delineates how Chan's films display an unconventional approach to Hong Kong cinema that is difficult to classify within the confines of its popular and highly recognizable commercial genres. Particularly, Chan's films work on many layers that navigate discourses of post-

Qing government's bloody crackdown on the political reform he initiated in 1898. Framed around their Swedish sojourn (1904-1908), Evans Chan's docudrama recounts Kang's epic struggle to modernize China and his dream of Datong: the Chinese utopia.

socialism, post-colonialism, diaspora, international New Wave, and accented cinema, among others.

In chapter two of the volume, Amy Lee analyzes *To Liv(e)* and deliberates the controversial issue of the Hong Kong government's deportation of Vietnamese boat people seeking political asylum. The film demonstrates the contradictory nature of being Hong Kong people, especially when they are doubly marginalized by the hegemonic British and Chinese national discourses before the 1997 handover. Lee argues that the film should not be understood as a political, ideological or aesthetic statement, but rather as a gateway to enter into a dialogue with the director, the film, and its themes.





Mo-yung (Anita Yuen Wing Yee) and Benny (Simon Yam Tat Wah) in *Crossings*

"Inspired by an interracial murder in a New York City subway station during the mid-80's, this unique merging of HK cinema and New York independent film is a worthy follow-up to director Evans Chan's justly celebrated debut. [...] Instead of following the wishes of her parents and flying to Toronto, Mo-yung (Anita Yuen) journeys instead to NYC, in hope of finding Benny (Simon Yam), a mysterious photographer who has attracted her. There, she meets Rubie, a sympathetic clinic worker who helps her to settle in the city. [...] However, both women's lives are destined to be shattered by the actions of Joey (Ted Brunetti), a dangerously violent and schizophrenic teacher, who has stopped taking his medication and is now stalking Rubie. [...] Yuen is superb, making the most of a rare chance to display the full range of her talents, and Lindzay Chan gives a genuine, touching performance, projecting very real intelligence and compassion. The drama is further aided by Kung Chi Shing's moody and varied soundtrack."— *John Charles, Video Watchdog*

In chapter three, viewing *Crossings* in light of the immigrant experience such as dislocation and loss in New York, Tony Williams looks at how the film combines "neo noir" in visual style and merges documentary and fiction (27). By examining how the narrative blurs boundaries in cultural, ethnic, geographical, historical, and temporal aspects, Williams reveals the collapse of national boundaries in the nature of East-West and international cultural dynamics at the end of the twentieth century.

Continuing the discussion, Hector Rodriguez takes a different approach to Chan's cinema by tackling the motif of memory that is closely tied to the themes of exiles,

homelessness, and displacements, a tradition in Hong Kong cinema exemplified by Ann Hui and Wong Kar-wai. This essay critically explores Chan's *The Map of Sex and Love* and the ways in which the director uses self-conscious emotional and geographic distancing as a device in art melodrama to express the life of the people inhabiting in the diaspora. In the next chapter, also looking at *The Map of Sex and Love*, Kenneth Chan shows that the major characters' pasts become a kind of cosmopolitan memory that sustains attachment through knowledge of interconnections between places, peoples, and histories. In both cases, the authors analyze how the personal is political by showing political minorities who live in the borderlines of nation-states.



The Map of Sex and Love









The Map of Sex and Love explores history past and present, and love gay and straight through three interrelated stories: *Rubber Band*, *Belgrade*, and *Nazi Gold*. In *Rubber Band*, a gay dancer is advised to heal his perversity by snapping a rubber band against his wrist. In *Belgrade*, a girl has a traumatic revelation while travelling in Eastern Europe; and in *Nazi Gold*, a filmmaker has an eerie encounter with an aftermath of the Third Reich in Macau. The film begins as Wei Ming, an expatriate Chinese filmmaker, returns from New York to Hong Kong. He meets Mimi, a frightened girl concealing an incident that occurred during her travels through Eastern Europe; and Larry, a gay dancer haunted by his own secret, a violent event involving his coming-out. The trio makes a trip to Macau, Wei Ming's childhood home to fathom allegations of Nazi gold being funnelled through the former Portuguese colony.

Tony Williams also looks into Chan's films alongside issues of de-colonization, sexuality, forms of artistic representations, and geographical and personal confluences, mainly in films such as *To Liv(e)* and *Bauhinia*. His analysis brings together Chan's two films *Journey to Beijing* and *Adeus Macau* that deal with Hong Kong's and Macau's reunification with Mainland China respectively. In her chapter, Gina Marchetti considers how *The Life and Times of Wu Zhong Xian* has employed Brechtian techniques of distancing for literary simulation and intertextual reference. Activist Wu struggled for independence from Britain for the Crown colony in the 1970s, but also for a better future as the Mainland dramatically changed in the following decades. Furthermore, Marchetti explains the ways that the film uses Wu's life to comment on the political present of Hong Kong through its radical past.

In a different perspective, in chapter eight, highlighting the artistry of the music artist Margaret Leng Tan, Michael Ingham evaluates the formal qualities of Chan's cinematic art, specifically how the director investigates both film and



Journey to Beijing: A 4-month philanthropic walk from Hong Kong to Beijing, between February 16 and June 15, 1997, became the prism through which writer-director Evans Chan views the rainbow-hued cross-currents of a Hong Kong gearing up for decolonization on July 1, 1997—when Britain handed the colony back to China. In this humorous and bittersweet look at the last leg of a sweeping historical journey that dates back to the Opium Wars, *Journey* speaks to Hong Kong walkers such as an aviator who once flew Deng Xiao Ping, a woman who witnessed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and a man testing his love for his wife through separation. Interposed with scenes from the walk as it passes through Mao's birthplace, the Yellow River, Tiananmen Square and the Great Wall are glimpses of a mutating Hong Kong—entrepreneurs and artists (Helen Lai, Joanna Chan), environmental worries (Christine Loh, Lew Young), and concerns about gay rights (Stanley Kwan, Julian Chan), political exile in California (Lo Fu) and angry democrats (Martin Lee, Lau San Ching) who will stay put.



Set at the edge of Ground Zero, the devastated 9/11 site in New York, a troubled romance unfolds as Bauhinia, a young expatriate woman from Hong Kong tries to salvage her rocky relationship with a yuppie mommy's boy. Her plight is further compounded by terrorist threats to her adopted city and by an unplanned pregnancy.

music as inventive expressions, demonstrating the complementary intermediality of his cinematic vision and Tan's musicality. Stacilee Ford's chapter thoughtfully examines teaching Chan's film *Bauhinia* both in Hong Kong and the United States. Ford draws attention to how the film deals exclusively with the Chinese/Hong Kong diasporic subjects in New York City soon after the September 11th, 2001 catastrophe. Ford looks at the cross-cultural and critical differences in considering the intricate topics of gender, diaspora and politics. In the last chapter, Tony Williams provides a comprehensive interview with the director. In this interview, director Chan talks about his films, the filmmakers and intellectuals that have influenced him, including Jean-Luc Godard and Susan Sontag (he has translated some of Sontag's work into Chinese), and his frequent collaborations with the actress Lindzay Chan.

Incontrovertibly, essays in this collection concentrate on the development and evolution in Chan's creative concerns. The book's purpose is to trace out the themes, film forms, visual perspectives, and private/public/temporal geographies in Chan's works. This edited volume showcases Chan's films and thematic issues that usually are marginalized in the mainstream media of Hong Kong and the United States. As a matter of fact, as an artist, intellectual, and playwright, Chan demands a critical border thinking that merges perspectives beyond the scope of traditional film studies. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has argued, the history of the modern, colonial, patriarchal and capitalist world system has favored the knowledge, culture, and epistemology produced by the West. It is from the geopolitics of knowledge of "peripherality" that critical "border thinking" emerges as a critique of modernity/coloniality towards pluriversality (Mignolo 329-31).

Chan's films touch upon socio-political issues that are still highly relevant and timely today. In this vein, the volume could have benefited much more from historical insights and perspectives by situating Chan within the transnational development of Hong Kong, Chinese, and U.S. cinema. With more historical insights and perspectives, this book could have further bridged the gaps in local/global sensibilities and the socio-political changes encountered by Hong Kong/Chinese diasporic subjects and their film industries since the 1980s. In addition, whether it was the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 (setting up the 1997 Handover) or the pro-democracy Umbrella Movement in 2014, even for commercial genres, many of the Hong Kong films have actively engaged with and are affected by the political and social ambience of the city, evident in the work of filmmakers ranging from Johnnie To, Benny Chan, Roy Chow, and Herman Yau. In fact, Chan's unique branch of transnational cinema would be worth examining in this regard, thus demonstrating not only critical border thinking in the mainstream media of Hong Kong and the United States, but also restoring historical avenues by appropriately contextualizing his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors in minor and/or political cinemas.

Several of the essays in this book such as those by Marchetti and Ingham have brought together the fields of theater, film and music. What the volume needs are more essays that—like these authors do—provide more engaging and rigorous approaches to "unthink" Chan's multiple critical and artistic experiences beyond disciplinary knowledge. This would offer the readers with extremely valuable and insightful perspectives, mostly because Chan's cinematic vision, artistic pursuit and intellectual inquiries have already transcended disciplinary boundaries as well as monotopic, global and universal purposes, and methodologies.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

One Way or Another: dialectical, revolutionary, feminist

by Julia Lesage

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One Way or Another (1974) has as major themes slum clearance and challenging a stubbornly persistent culture of poverty. The repeated image of a wrecking ball serves as a visual leitmotif to also indicate psychological change.



An educational-documentary-style voice-off narration opens the film discussing the history of urban poverty before and after the Cuban revolution. This version of social change is not wrong, but limited. It does not take into consideration how people feel or what motivates them to act.

Dialectics defined

Dialectics, a Marxist philosophical concept deriving from Hegel, establishes the relation between human drives, ideas, and consciousness, on the one hand, and objective "reality," on the other, be that reality nature, social relations and structures, productive forces, or history.[1] [open endnotes in new window] The theory of dialectical materialism contains within it two integrally related and inseparable "sub-theories," or, more accurately, points of emphasis. One focuses on the movement and processes inherent in the external world, e.g., natural phenomena, modes of production, or social relations. The other approach focuses on the history and scope of human thought and posits dialectical thinking as both the most effective and realistic method of intellectual and political exposition.

Within the dialectical method of inquiry and exposition, as Marxist philosopher Bertell Ollman points out, the difference in where one begins leads to a difference in perspective, in the size and importance of the "factors" considered in the investigation or discussion, and in the relevance of the various ties known or found to be existing between those factors.[2] In film criticism, most of the time that the term dialectical is used, it refers to conflicting or interrelated factors. However, critics often use the word dialectical when the terms interaction, conflict, abrupt contrast, or juxtaposition would serve just as well, and the term dialectical loses the richness, complexity, and precision which it has within the tradition of Marxist thought. If I do not emphasize the notion of "interacting factors," it is not to diminish this concept's real importance. Rather, I wish to demonstrate that merely to analyze "interrelated factors" is to neglect one of the key aspects of both dialectical art and dialectical film criticism: elucidating the relation of human consciousness to historical and social process and change.

> "People are confronted with a web of natural phenomena. ... Categories are stages in distinguishing, i.e., of cognizing the world, focal points in the web, which assist in ... mastering it" (Lenin, writing on Hegel).[3]

People will always feel dissatisfied with what is not. They constantly have new needs, emotional drives, and a subjective sense of what they want—in particular, a desire to control the conditions of their lives. They presuppose the existence of the external world as they act upon it to concretize their goals. They generate ideas and, over the centuries, develop rules of logic and science in relation to their need to act effectively in the world. Ideas—generalizations, conceptual thinking, and a sense of necessity or "law"—accompany all human perception, experience, and



The main characters are a romantic couple: Mario, a factory worker, and Yolanda, a primary school teacher. Each is challenged at work to act in new and different ways.



Lots of meetings are shown in the film. Here Mario's father (right) sits on the governing council of the factory where both work. We see repeated scenes of a meeting where one of Mario's friends is censored for malingering.



Yolanda and Mario often argue, and the end of the film is an extreme long shot of them still together but arguing as they walk down the streets of Havana.

language. Although generalizations must always seem poorer than the richness of the concrete, sensuous world, they are necessary to fully comprehend the concrete in all its relations and contradictions, in its process and movement. In return, the truth of ideas is proven by their adequacy in practice.

> "Consciousness not only reflects the external world but creates it" (Lenin).[4]

Dialectical thinking assumes both the historicity of the thinker and the possibility of arriving at a relative truth. It assumes that intellectual functioning is purposeful and arises out of people's needs; the needs themselves change and will continue to change historically.

The concept of dialectics has been developed in the Marxist tradition by Marx and Engels, by Lenin in his philosophic commentaries on Hegel, by Mao in such essays as "On Contradiction" and "On Practice," and by philosophers and political scientists such as Henri Lefebvre and Bertell Ollman.[5] In this tradition, Marxists have elaborated and demonstrated a process or method of theoretical, conceptual thinking which has as its end elucidating its object, the concrete world, in terms of that world's all-sidedness, contradictions, determinations, and necessities. Dialectics explains process and change.

An equally important aspect of Marxist dialectical thinking (this emphasis can also be found in Hegel) is that people will accept a given objective truth, will seize upon, use, and master a given concept, only when that truth, or theory in general, takes on its own vitality in human social practice. To give an example from my own life, because I participate in the women's movement the terms patriarchy and sexual politics have a complexity and conceptual force for me as tools for explaining both my own situation and women's oppression in general; but they explain very little for those unwilling to believe women are oppressed.

In Cuba, one often hears someone say, "Yo soy revolucionaria/o"("I'm a revolutionary"), and the concept revolution has an explanatory power about social process which most Cuban people understand in detailed and sophisticated terms. Mass understanding in Cuba about social process derives from a broad consensus that the revolution must not only be preserved but nurtured, deepened and built. Because of this consensus and a general public interest in history, politics, and the dynamics of social change, cultural work and especially film production in Cuba takes on a new intellectual force. Filmmakers work with the confidence that they can elucidate and contribute to ongoing social process, and their work has a unique historical effectiveness because there is a fruitful, dialectical relation between audience, filmmaker, and film.

One Way or Another

In its content, cinematic form, and relation to its audience, Sara Gomez's *One Way or Another* (Cuba, 1974/1977) is a dialectical film. It is a film made with a fine sense of the potentially close relation between art and people's lives and between art and social and historical change. It is also a feminist film. Rather than just look at women's lives under socialism, *One Way or Another* takes on a more complex task. It examines Cuban revolutionary process from the vantage point of the neighborhood and the domestic sphere, and it depicts the ways that









A fellow teacher criticizes how Yolanda has dealth with a problem student, Lazaro. When Lazaro is picked up for street crime, Yolanda goes the juvenille city bureau to attend a case meeting about him. There she is asked to try to form an affectionat bond with him. We see her taking him to an ice cream parlor and his needy response.

revolutionary change is and must be effected in terms of what people as individuals know that they want.

Internal to the film's narrative, the story deals in part with a love affair between a man born in a Havana slum, Mario, and a petite bourgeoise woman, Yolanda, who has been sent to work in that area as a primary school teacher. Both characters are seen dealing with problems at work. Their reaction to work problems reflects their class background and has implications for their present and future intimate life. By focusing on these two characters, the film shows the complex relation between an individual's needs and degree of personal and social understanding (or, correspondingly, degree of false consciousness) and larger historical, social, and economic processes. The film emphasizes how people create both their own personal lives and their social world. Change comes from conflict and negation, from recognizing mistakes, from emotional interaction with and criticism from others, and from affection and collective support.

Every moment and aspect of the characters' lives is seen in terms of the complex social relations that form and condition them. In turn, each aspect of the characters' lives and each interaction between characters influences both their own future and that of others. The film traces how the internal dynamics of a single personality, family, or love affair are related to the larger social processes of the revolution, especially the institutions of education, urban planning, and work. Past history bears on the present, and what individuals do in the present is, in turn, history making and historically important. Both personal and social development proceed through cumulative change (here, slum clearance and building new homes) and through unexpected confrontations and leaps. The film presents Mario and Yolanda's affair as a "moment" of the whole of their culture and uses that love relation as a vehicle to examine the interconnections between social structures and possibilities for both personal and social change.

Characterization and narrative structure

One Way or Another manipulates its narrative structure in many ways and offers us only fragments of characterization. The titles introduce *One Way or Another* as "a feature film about some real people and other fictional ones." In general, the film alternates between documentary and fiction, and it also often operates in what I shall call a mixed mode, especially presenting the fictional characters in a documentary-like way. The documentary segments mainly relate the history and social background of the "marginal" population of the port cities Havana and Matanzas and discuss how this previous slum population, overwhelmingly black, has not yet been totally integrated into the revolution. The fictional segments show two characters beginning a love relationship and facing personal conflicts at work. The protagonists work through and we come to understand the contradictions which are an integral part of their personal histories. Qualitative changes do occur in their lives. In the context of looking at a love relationship, we come to see how a community can work together and even lovers can challenge and help each other within a revolutionary framework so as not to repeat again and again old, outworn, destructive ways.

In addition to telling a love story, the film also traces extensively Mario's relation with an associate from work, Humberto. Both men have a limited social understanding—in Marxist terms, false consciousness. Both face intense social pressure to change but each deals with that pressure in a different way. The fictional sequences depicting this male friendship are structured much like the episodes in a Brecht play. Each sequence highlights the social context of a given moment of individual behavior or (false) consciousness and shows the social effect of individual choices. These two men are both shaped by their environment and held responsible for their behavior, and each sequence of the film in which



Humberto, the genial *bon vivant* and slacker.

they appear together is structured to challenge the ethic of machismo they cling to.

Humberto takes off work for five days to travel with a woman; he tells people at work that his mother is dying. His pursuit of personal interest results in his using others as means, thinking his real self resides outside work in leisure and sexuality, and not recognizing how personal and social interest coincide. He holds to an ethic of individualism and sees the needs and rights of others as limiting his pleasure. Mario knew of Humberto's plan and was not enthusiastic about it but did nothing. When the factory workers' council, on which Mario's father is an official, meets with the gathered personnel (played by real workers from a Cuban bus factory) to decide whether or not to discipline Humberto, Mario denounces Humberto in a fit of rage because he thinks Humberto has implicitly called him an informer.



Real workers play out a scene from the film. At the end, real workers in a bar argue about Mario's behavoir at this "meeting" about Humberto. Was he a snitch?



Mario, the fictional character, tells about Humberto's misdeeds because he thinks Humberto has implicitly accused him of snitching.

This denunciation sequence opens the film, when we know nothing about the two men. The same sequence is repeated midway in the film, when we understand much more of Mario's position. Furthermore, the second version presents a key moment before the denunciation. Mario tries to leave the room as Humberto is giving his excuses. However, Mario's father, from the table in the front of the room, forbids his disgusted son to leave the crowded room, telling him as a co-worker in the factory that the meeting is not over yet. By implication, this suggests that the father also suspected that his son knew something about Humberto's delinquency but that the son had suppressed that information out of an ethic of manly friendship.



Audience response to the film resembled this lively discussion that Sara Gomez filmed in a bar. The man to the left said that Humberto should not have used a sick mother as an excuse to travel to visit a lover: Mothers are sacred.

What is at stake here and what we see very clearly the second time we see this sequence is how both Mario and Humberto are ideologically bound by their own conceptions of their identity. Mario is confused and cannot formulate public criticisms; he cannot yet recognize the real implications of Humberto's act, his own self-interest as a worker, and the full range of his own choices and responsibilities within that specific work context. By participating in collective process, workers in Cuba gain a great deal of democratic control over the conditions of their day-to-day work life. Humberto clearly chooses separation from that environment, but he is not shown as a "bad" man. He has a certain liar's charm, and the "judgment" against him is calculated to drive him from his isolation, as he gets a sentence of being "watched" for six months by his fellow workers. Mario's behavior is what the film challenges for being socially backward or adolescent—Mario did not tell on Humberto for the right reasons or at the right time. Both the rationality of work relations in an egalitarian work setting and the emotional quality of those relations. are dramatically brought out in this meeting to hear Humberto's case.



These men argue about how Mario let down his fellow workers and the revolution.



Trade unions ask members to "approve an extra day of work on a public project, work more and better, don't fail to show up or get there late, and support voluntary work projects." Toward the end of the film we see just such a voluntary effort with actors and neighborhood residents spending a day on a clean-up and beautification project.



In a later sequence, we see these same workers gathered at a bar discussing Mario and Humberto. The nonprofessional actors, factory workers themselves, heatedly get into the fiction because it represents a real issue for them. The major topic of discussion is the relation of the individual to the whole, and the very fact of the emotion invested in this discussion reflects a real urgency felt by the workers to articulate that relation. Statements made include the following: "If you're a revolutionary, you can't ask me to cover for you. The revolution is bigger than both of us." "Why did he speak up so late? He exploded only as a wronged individual and man." "Everyone gets another chance." "He's a rat because he made me do his work while he was living it up."

In fact, both Mario and Yolanda had to learn to grow into and to take their identity from the democratic work structures established by the revolution—a factory council or a collectively-working school faculty. And this growth had to be both intellectual and emotional. What their colleagues demonstrate to be a "rational" way of conducting work relations is also a judgmental and pressuring knowledge that makes demands on Mario and Yolanda to change. Yolanda's co-workers criticize her for a lack of sympathy and emotional understanding toward parents and one pupil, a delinquent boy, Lazaro, and she is then encouraged by a correctional institution advisor to enter into an emotional relation with that boy, which she does.

There is a central role given to direct, personal, political criticism—from the folksinger Guillermo Diaz's song demanding that his audience leave a slum environment and the old habits learned there, to the confrontation Yolanda faces from her fellow teachers. These sequences in the film indicate a whole attitude toward social change in Cuba which is very different from what we experience in or expect from public institutions in the United States.

Rather than look at conflict as merely painful or disruptive or seeing it as something that can or should be contained, dialectical thought looks at all phenomena, natural and social, in terms of ongoing internal process and built-in change. From Hegel to Mao, Marxists have developed the concepts of contradiction and negation to explain differentiation and the emergence of the new. No natural or social phenomenon is a unified entity, but within it there is always an internal development of various incompatible aspects of the phenomenon, the "struggle" of which leads to transformation and the emergence either of a new stage or a new entity. One aspect or term of a contradiction, as emphasized by Mao, is always stronger and growing in force. In the incompatible development of two necessarily related entities (e.g., labor and capital) or in the contradictory aspects of a single phenomenon (e.g., the conflicting feelings a woman has toward her work in the domestic sphere), there is always movement—proceeding from negation, repeated conflicts, and reaction against the past—toward something new. There is always a becoming, always a transformation in progress.

One of the main contradictions explored in *One Way or Another* is between individualism and collectivity, between the private and public spheres, between "me" and the collective "you." But this conflict is not presented as occurring between clearly opposed sides or separate individuals, like good guys versus bad guys. Rather, as is posited in the Marxist theory of dialectics, the opposing terms of a contradiction reciprocally interact with each other, indeed interpenetrate each other, and are transformed into each other.

Because social process is understood in terms of contradiction and transformation and because revolution means to Cubans to attempt to guide that process directly, open criticism is presented in *One Way or Another* as a way of acknowledging everyone's right, collectively pursued, to shape their neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. On the personal level, to us such criticism may seem harsh or



The film explores class contradictions through its protagonists. In its dialectical treatment of class, the film demonstrates how within class, there is always movement—proceeding from negation, repeated conflicts, and reaction against the past—toward something new. In this sequence Yolanda and her sister go on a double date to a fancy restaurant. While the gals are in the ladies' room, the guys drink shots at the bar. Here's to the revolution, Mario says. Why? Because without it we wouldn't be here, toasting together.



Mario and his father work together on a neighborhood beautification project.



Mario: I'm all messed up.
Father: You were before, but not now.

manipulative or, if we have been well socialized as women, just not "nice." Corporate liberals speak of conflict management. In contrast to the general attitude here, both the characters in *One Way or Another* and the film as a whole bring conflicts out in the open, with the sense that directly confronting a problem will and should effectively sharpen the terms of the contradiction. The fact that Cuba's marginal population has an outlook and way of life that often inhibits it from integration into the revolution is not hidden but is the topic of a film made within that revolution.

Similarly the film confronts machismo, especially the hallowed code of manly honor. In fact, in its effect in Cuba, the part of the film that struck audiences the most, indeed a sequence that was literally continued in other bars and cafes, was the sequence where the workers discussed whether or not Mario denounced Humberto too late. The politics of whether or not one should betray a friendship at work became, because of this film, a matter of open public debate.

One Way or Another depicts the interpenetration of the public and private spheres, of people's personal lives and public demands made on them, in a far more subtle and complex way than merely presenting criticism sessions. The film treats its two protagonists gently. They are shown as two adults whom those around them assume can and want to change. By implication, all adults in a revolutionary culture are faced with the task of transforming themselves personally. The film portrays a realistic context in which peers both challenge and nurture each other to grow into new social roles. The teachers in Yolanda's school say their job is to give affection to the students and to "parent" the parents as well.

Similarly, there is a reversal of the generation conflict in Mario's family. In most cases, it is youth who advocate the new and disdain parents for clinging to the old. Here, Mario's parents, who are community leaders, patiently wait for their son to take his place in the revolution. He had moved from street urchin to the army to factory work. The parents had already seen Mario change a lot since the revolution. They understood his situation within the context of seeing everyone in their neighborhood being asked to grow into new ways. After the incident with the factory council, we see Mario at home with his father, who opens the blinds in the morning to let the sun in and makes his son a cup of coffee. Mario sits slumped at the table, head down. "I'm all messed up," Mario complains. "You were before, but not now," replies the father, ending this brief sequence. The film then cuts to a wrecking ball demolishing a slum building, a shot repeated throughout the film symbolic of the whole process of social change.

Criticism, art, work, social participation, and love are all shown in the film as avenues to new understanding. Characters interact with each other and influence each other profoundly. The film shows how on a deeply personal level, the Cuban revolution has demanded that people struggle against alienation, false consciousness, and old compulsive ways. As political contradictions are worked out by the characters in the film, the domestic and personal sphere is revealed as the place where individuals struggle to know what they want, and this struggle is always incomplete.

It is in this sense that I see *One Way or Another* as a feminist film. Realistically, the public sphere as depicted in the film is still predominantly male, and perhaps also realistically, Yolanda is presented mainly in terms of her emotional roles. I



Lazaro's mother, whose man did not stick around.



She tells Yolanda that even though he is hard to handle, she needs Lazaro. He is indispensible in helping her around the house and with childcare.

wish that the film had focused more on a mother/daughter relation, delineating the role of that relation in the revolutionary process as well. In fact, the film's "feminism" lies in the way that it attributes sincere emotional interactions to its male characters and considers a profound and sincere emotional life important for men's, especially Mario's, revolutionary development. Humberto's transgression comes from his abuse of sexuality and trust as well as from skipping work. Lazaro's mother—her pathos, dependency, and limited outlook—represents another vision of the kind of woman whom Humberto thought was so much "fun," and her life is the consequence of that male attitude toward sexual relations.

Far beyond their relation to men, the film shows these previously "marginal" women as needing to develop themselves as many-sided persons and as "counting" as members of the community. The delinquent mothers whom Yolanda challenges are no different in economic origins than Mario's own parents but have persisted in self-deprecating and negative concepts of their own role. The courts say they cannot change the parents, but Yolanda's co-workers insist that these are the people who must be worked with. Sadly, it is the mothers, not Mario or even Humberto, who are the real *marginales* persisting after the revolution. These women explain realistically to the camera that they cannot cope with the "double day" of working and raising children alone; but the limitation of the film's imaginative scope is that it does not deal more with what is perhaps the material basis of these women's narrow range of social concern—not enough money and/or daycare and, physically, just plain overwork—nor does it indicate, as it does with Mario and Humberto, how these women's limited social perspective might be overcome.

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Cinematic structures and relation to audience



From the opening credits: a shot of a balcony in a slum apartment building, over which is inscribed: "A feature film with some real characters and some fictional ones."



Two pages of credits list the "real characters."

The second way that *One Way or Another* explicitly clarifies the relation between ideas and historical and social reality is in its cinematic art.[6] [open endnotes in new window] The cinematic structures and filmic tactics are components of the signifier that clarify the forms or structures of the signified, i.e., real social structures existent in Cuba today. As I will demonstrate, the film's form elucidates the real, urgent political implications in Cuban life of certain modes of discourse, certain ways of thinking, and certain ways of approaching social and personal problems, Gomez offers the film as an imaginary, intellectual, and emotional "construct" to the audience which is potentially a model for understanding contemporary Cuban society from the vantage point or perspective of the individual self.

As Bertell Ollman has pointed out, *Marx's Capital, Volume One*, demonstrates two of the most important features of the dialectical method. First, each structure Marx posits and labels with a noun, such as value or labor or productive forces, is really a term that also means a verb, i.e., a whole social, historical, and economic process, and by implication refers to and includes within it all the relations inherent in that process. It also includes its negation as its own "other." (To define "capital" is also to define "labor" and the historical and necessary relation of the two.) Similarly, *One Way or Another* asks us to consider both "individualism" and the "individual" as phenomena and to understand them dialectically from the perspective of history, class, and collectivity as well as from the dramatic perspective of the life of unique characters. The personal changes the characters encounter are presented as being as much a part of "slum clearance" as is any public planning or housing construction.

The second feature of *Capital* described by Ollman is Marx's ability to "chunk" information in many different ways, to see factors worth considering as coming from all walks of life, to incorporate analyses from every possible level of human thought and experience, to view things and their relations not as fixed but as changing, to alter his classificational boundaries and manipulate the "size" of the factors under consideration to suit his changing purpose or point of emphasis, and not to deal in mutually exclusive categories.

In the cinematic structure of *One Way or Another*, Sara Gomez does the same thing. She switches modes of cinematic discourse and, among the characters in their dialogue, modes of social discourse. This tactic leads the audience to think about the political effectiveness or implications of each of these ways of imparting information. She groups the characters in widely varying ways. She shows us very different social perspectives on urban space. In each instance her purpose is similar to Bertolt Brecht's in his plays. Each sequence in the film emphasizes the social context of the characters' emotions, decisions, and lives, and the drama illustrates in return the dynamics of real social change.

Different ways of portraying Yolanda



She faces the camera in interview style and discusses how she feels about work and the students.



Her wedding pictures with her former husband, as she tells Mario that that man's frequent absences taught her to be independent, which she appreciates.



Yolanda, at a departmental meeting in the school. She said, in interview facing the camera, that girls especially suffer because they finish 6th grade and just get married and have children. The teacher to her left denies this and says girl students have lots of opportunities. Although Yolanda is severely criticized by her colleagues, she also has constructive, and here, unrecognized ideas to contribute. She calls herself very "outspoken."



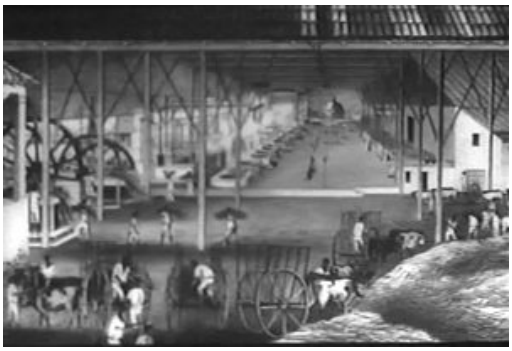
In a comic way, Yolanda criticizes Mario's concept of manlieness. She walks around the bedroom in a swagger, saying that's how he is with his buddies. With her he is another kind of man. Their intimacy then opens him up to an ever greater depth of understanding between the two of them.



"Tell me a real truth," Yolanda says. Mario replies, "I'm sared shitless."

As a film, as a work of art, the relation between signifier and signified in *One Way or Another* offers a fine example of dialectical exposition; furthermore, the relation between film and audience provides a concrete example of the function of dialectical art. In its structure, the film alternates between different kinds of sequences. These include the following: relatively short fictional sequences following Mario and Yolanda in and out of their social roles and in various situations and locales; documentary sequences explaining slum life, slum clearance, and the new neighborhoods where previous slum dwellers now live and where remnants of their old culture and habits which are "marginal" to the revolution still persist; historical sequences of the growth of the "voodoo" or Abacuá society and a contemporary Abacuá ritual; and both fictional and documentary footage relating the story of real-life boxer and singer, Guillermo











Shots from the little internal documentary about the Abacuá society: the intertitle, historical importation of slaves for sugar plantations, the

Diaz.

Over the documentary sections, a commentary states the official view of marginal culture and describes the problems marginality has created for the revolution. The speaker has a flat, unemotional voice and the text uses a kind of formal sociological language. Most of the time this voice-over commentary offers an accurate summary of what we see in the film of people's lives, but it is also pompous and grating. Such an irritating tone serves as an ironic commentary on the political limitations of this kind of discourse in effecting real change in ordinary people's daily lives.

Much of the film shows people talking. And this lively talk is the counterpoint to the pedantic but realistic voice-over commentary. The film wants us to think of conversation as a process and to note the relation between what people say, where it comes from, and where it leads to. In the filmed workers' council meeting, at the men's domino game, and at the bar, everyone has something to say. There are also intense, intimate conversations and gentle, laughing ones with father, mother, lover, and same-sex friends. The quality of the talk, the things talked about the occasions that provoke such conversations or formal explanations—all these are clearly delineated in the film as part of specific social situations and coming from people who have specific histories, especially definite class backgrounds.

Similarly, the film juxtaposes and has various filmic ways of presenting different kinds of events and locales. The film constructs and elaborates in detail units on a personally observable scale and of a personally appealing kind: a love relation, gentle moments in family life, work relations, building up a new neighborhood by volunteer labor, a workers' council meeting, a teacher's relation to students and parents, a bar, a singer playing a song at his home and at a concert. The various locales that are presented are related to this "humanized" scale, this personal space; and many larger processes are indicated but not directly, or perhaps only schematically, seen (e.g., the army, revolution, work processes and routines, and the actual slum clearance).

Personal space is understood from the context of history, and the revolution is seen from the perspective of daily life. Thus, the new neighborhoods are first shown with goats in them, indicating the continuance of marginal culture in a new environment; and then these same neighborhoods are seen with Mario and Yolanda's participating in their cleanup and beautification. Not only do we evaluate all spaces in terms of the characters we have come to know best, but the opposite is also true. Both we and the film evaluate the major characters and their conflicts in terms of the extension of their lives into the past and the future, their relation to established social structures, and their relation to a specific geographic and social space.

To show some of the interrelations between the commentary, the characters' lives, and the types of language and situations used to develop a specific problem in the film, we can look at the film's approach to spiritualism as a social force and as a religious belief. Mario, in the first long conversation we see him having with Yolanda, shows her an area that used to be a slum, the area he grew up in. He said that he thought then of becoming a nañigo, an Abacuá society priest, but that his life had been changed too much by the revolution, boarding school, and the army. "Well, you cannot become a nañigo then," Yolanda responds laughingly. "Why not?" demands Mario, thinking his range of choices is being challenged by her. "Mentality," she answers enigmatically. "What?" "You just said that you have a different outlook now," she jokes and runs up the hill. It seems the first time anyone has challenged Mario to consider directly how much he has in fact changed.

The film then presents a documentary history of the Abacuá society and notes how it perpetuates a myth of woman-as- arch-betrayer and therefore maintains a

god, the nañigo, the machismo. What the film does not comment on is the kind of spiritualism that Mario's mother practices.







"Mario doesn't believe in this either. But you can burn these santos when I'm gone."



Yolanda is directly critical of parents who do not supervise their children's schoolwork and prohibit

code of male supremacy. The voice-over here takes a strong political stand that none of the characters themselves can take, since Mario's mother herself, although an active participant in the revolutionary neighborhood organizations, still maintains an altar of statues and "saints" in her house. As a matter of fact, at no time in the film do any of the characters make such strong statements to each other about required change—even though their criticisms of each other are direct and emotionally intense. Emphatically, the voice over the visual depiction of Abacuá rituals states the following:

> "We believe that its traditional, secret, exclusive nature sets it against progress and prevents it from assimilating the values of modern life. Therefore, in its present stage, it generates marginality, promoting a code of parallel social relations that is the antithesis of social integration."

Because of the unusual use of the word "we" in the discourse and because of the strength of the condemnation, this seems to be Gomez's own view. The exposition of this aspect of Mario's past partly explains why he clings to codes of honor and manhood. We do not doubt this "explanation" nor that the Abacuá religious society is politically regressive. Yet the character Yolanda is closer than the voice-over commentary in understanding how it is that people change and move away from such a regressive structure and mode of thought. The revolution will provide people, if they wish, with another kind of *mentalidad*.

The film both gives a political prescription on the Abacuá society and looks gently and nurturingly at how such things as religious participation and belief are worked out, in contradictory ways, in the characters' lives. As a cultural artifact of a revolutionary society, the film also plays a role in changing people's lives. Gently it asks people, especially men, to give up old ways, and it does that from a wise parent's or friend's understanding of why people are where they are and what steps they can reasonably be pushed to take.

Dialectical thinking not only presents us with a series of interrelated factors, but it shows differences, connections, transitions, negations, and transformations between those factors. Dialectics also makes clear the levels, interconnections, and transitions between the concepts one uses to present and explain the various aspects of social reality. In the film, Yolanda and Mario are often filmed in group situations in documentary-style long-shots, which are edited together with real portraits of Havana life. Furthermore, Mario's father is played by a real-life community activist who has worked for years to transform the slums, as has Guillermo Diaz. These two figures are seen in sequences that could be historical newsreel footage or could be fictional sequences, created in these neighborhoods just for this film. The "reality" of the fictional characters' environment comes from a real urban neighborhood, confirming that the two protagonists' emotional development could be that of many other people there today.

Significantly, Lazaro and his mother are not actors. The mother tells this boy's and her own pathetic story to the world for the sake of this film. In the United States such a use of cinema verite for the sake of a fiction would strike me as exploitative, but in the context of this film, that the mother relates her story to the camera seems a positive social act. In a society which has class inequalities structurally built into it, naturalistic art which presents the plight of the poor can only offer us pathos to be consumed, since the society itself refuses a certain kind of change. In Cuba, in spite of severe poverty, there is a hope for change and an effort to promote that change. Thus this mother's telling her story is not a declaration of mere pathos but a sincere expression that both she and the filmmakers hope will lead to positive social change.

Similarly, but in another cinematic mode, the sensationalistic story of Guillermo Diaz's losing his boxing career because he killed a man hanging around his fiancee is presented in the film in stylized melodramatic form. In the old days, it was a

absenteeism and tardiness. Her colleagues want her to understand the culture of poverty and find more constructive ways to change it.



Her colleagues confront Yolanda about how she deals with studenta and parents



Yolanda's reaction to the criticism.



Guillermo Diaz is a former professional boxer, now a singer. Mario talks to him about problems with Yolanda, and Diaz says to leave his old world and embrace the new, that most people are afraid to leave what they know.

lurid tale coloring all of the man's life. Now when the society has a sense of how people can and should change and how they can contribute to social process, Diaz is an esteemed member of his community and a touchstone of value in the film. The episode is no longer anything to be ashamed about but a factual part of the past.

In the context of its goals as socialist art, *One Way or Another* refuses to contribute to segmented knowledge and segmented existence. It shows that a knowledge of a key aspect of Cuban life, marginality, must not be parceled into a sociological discourse available primarily to an elite, even though that discourse contains some of the truth. The individuals in the film are shown in terms of real needs that people in any audience can identify with. The film also refers to a concrete reality in Cuba, and in treating a specific problem, it gives the audience imaginative and conceptual tools to look at extensions of these problems in their own lives—namely, love, "honor," and marginality. Because of the many modes of filmic discourse and ways of presenting information and emotion, the film shows us ways to look at thought and emotion in terms of change and movement and social context. The film's ideas are "full" because they give audiences—especially Cubans, who have given a general assent to revolutionary process—an impulse to more aware and more loving social action and courage to try something new or modify what had previously been done unthinkingly.

In intellectual terms, the film provides a political contribution about how to go about thinking dialectically. It is not just the "single-voiced" story of Mario and Yolanda's love. The narrative fragmentation is not obscure. The visual and audio disjunctures do have interconnections, understandable in political and social terms. In thinking through these interconnections for themselves, the audience members are being asked to create social meaning: about the characters, about the relation between fiction and documentary, about modes of discourse, about marginal life and culture, and about the relation of the personal and emotional to the political and public sphere. The creativity involved in receiving the film, the creativity demanded by the film's structure and content, thus involves the audience in an experience in understanding the dynamics of social change.

Historical reality is inside us as well as around us, and it is created by what goes on inside us emotionally as well as by our will. To grasp the "idea" or principle behind appearances is to be more involved in history than not to do so. When we see social and conceptual structures and their interconnection and their movement, we can fully see our own choices and areas of responsibility and can act in accordance with both reality and the potential of our own fullest being. *One Way or Another* sees its characters as both individual and historical and shows them as becoming more and more conscious of the choices they can and do make.

One of the principles of dialectics is that altered relations change the terms and direction of the argument, that they enable an entity to do new things in a way not done before. Feminist art has as its goal altering our understanding of, making more conscious, and actually transforming the relations between the public and the private sphere. Power relations are not directly changed by art, but when the feminist sensibility articulated in contemporary art is tied to a movement for social change, it is the capacity to make criticisms, to recognize oneself for the position one is really in, and to imagine real alternatives that women's art serves. And it is this self-awareness and imaginative capacity that is both prerequisite and essential component of revolutionary and, in dialectical terms, historically appropriate and necessary social change.

Postscript

September 28, 2016

When I wrote this essay, it was after visiting Cuba and seeing this film there. Later



Guillero is a professional singer and his song concludes the film: "Leave your world that does not care, that has no morning flower, only bars to show its power."

I had the chance to visit Sandinista Nicaragua. The question that concerned me the most during both visits was this: how do people change? Within both the Sandinista and Cuban revolutions, I met with many people who embraced change and the chance to do everything anew. But I also saw opportunists and those just trying to live their lives, often in the face of hardship. And I saw the same problems for women that Yolanda saw, early pregnancy and motherhood cutting off girls' educational and professional futures.

As we face our world's ecological decline, I still forsee that socialist revolution will need to accompany a different way of living on this earth. But I do not know what kinds of collaborative social processes will emerge, nor how coercive or liberating they will be. Although *One Way or Another* addresses a persistent social problem in urban areas, the obdurate nature of a culture of poverty, it has an utopian aspect, as does much of Cuban cinema in this period. That is, the film assumes that in the collective endeavor lies the possibility for personal growth and change. During the 70s, I experienced a kind of exhiliration doing collective work in the women's movment, but I also experienced the kinds of contradictions and interpersonal tensions that hindered my and others' participation. In addition, in the United States, the ideology of individualism so permeates our culture, it is hard to imagine collective projects, including work, that override individualism as an ethic. Perhaps in our time, revolution remains an utopian ideal, but films like *One Way or Another* stand as a testimony to thinking through the complexities about how change might really occur.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

This essay is dedicated to Sara Gomez's family, who welcomed me to their home in Cuba.

1. For a Marxist reading of Hegel and an explicit discussion of dialectics, see the following: V. I. Lenin, *Philosophical Notebooks, Collected Works, vol. 38* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972); Henri Lefebvre, *Dialectical Materialism*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968); Lefebvre, *Logique formelle, Logique dialectique* (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1947); Lefebvre, *The Sociology of Marx*, trans. N. Guterman (New York: Random-Vintage, 1968). [return to page 1]

2. Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Concept of Man in Capitalist Society,* 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1976). It is extremely disappointing that in the second edition of *Alienation* Ollman neither changed the generic use of "man" nor discussed why he failed to do so. He did write new material to respond to critics of the first edition, and significantly he does not use the generic "man" to stand for both men and women in the text of those revisions. The fact that he has changed his own later writing style means that he cannot be ignorant of the issues at stake, but he does not at any point in this new edition acknowledge the women's movement or the intellectual insights it has engendered. Furthermore, he emphasizes the key role of language and terminology in Marx's writings and states that the "relational sense Marx gives to social entities has some basis in the German language which readers of the English version of his work necessarily miss"; at the same time, Ollman does not discuss whether "man" is the most accurate or appropriate English concept for a key Marxist term, man or Mensch in German being more commonly translated as "one," "person," or "human." Furthermore, clinging to the term "man" weakens Ollman's entire argument about alienation itself. He offers a particularly weak discussion of ideology, neglecting as he does women's socialization and the role of the family in the reproduction of production relations. Since this book is a key text in English on the theory of dialectics, its political failings, which become serious intellectual failings, hurt us all.

3. Lenin, "Conspectus of Hegel's Science of Logic," Philosophical Notebooks, p. 93.

4. Lenin, p. 212.

5. Mao Tse Tung, *Selected Essays* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1952).

6. In its inconsistent exposure and excessive graininess, this black-and-white film sometimes looks like a work print that falls drastically short of the high production values we usually associate with Cuban film. Some of this graininess is deliberately used to capture a documentary "feel," especially in the sequences where Mario's father or Guillermo Diaz are shown as community leaders, presumably in past times in the former slum. After Sara Gomez shot and edited this film in 16mm, the original negative was damaged in processing, and it took two years in labs in Sweden to restore the footage to its current state. Tragically, Sara Gomez died shortly after editing the film, and associates Tomás Gutiérrez

Alea and Rigoberto Lopez supervised the sound-mix and post-production stages of preparing *One Way or Another* for theatrical release. [return to page 2]

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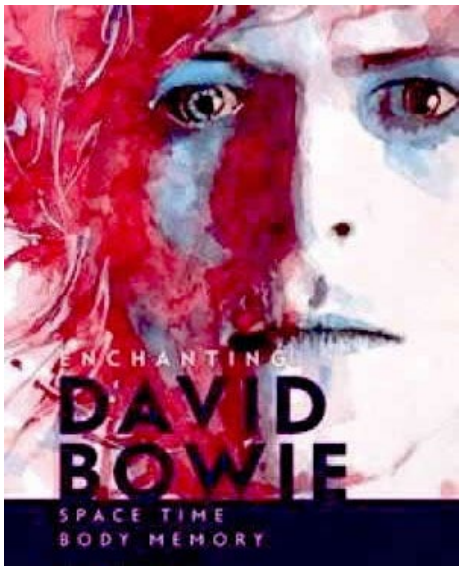
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Punk, glitter and glam redrafted: going downtown with Patti Smith and David Bowie

review by Gina Marchetti

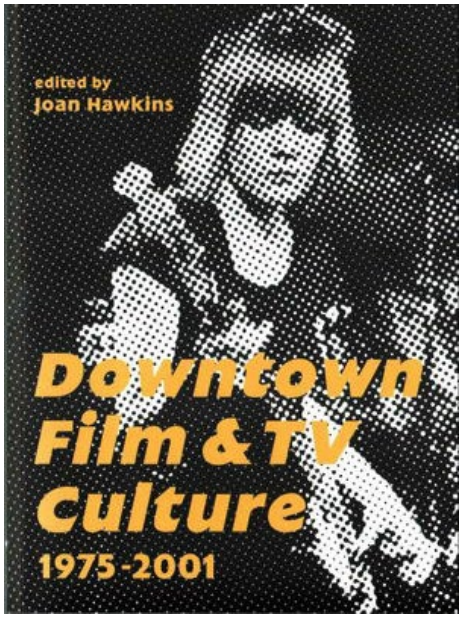
- Cinque, Toija, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond, eds. *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Print. 355 pp.
- Grant, Charles L., Geoffrey Marsh, and Victoria Broackes, eds. *David Bowie Is*. London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 2013. Print. 320 pp.
- Hawkins, Joan, ed. *Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975-2001*. Chicago, USA: Intellect Books, 2015. Print. 308 pp.
- Smith, Patti. *Just Kids*. London: Bloomsbury, 2010. 308 pp.



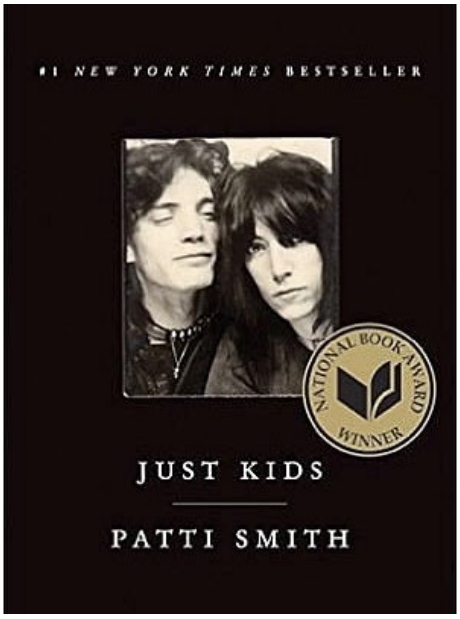


[Above] Grant, Charles L., Geoffrey Marsh, and Victoria Broackes, eds. *David Bowie Is.*

[Left] Cinque, Toija, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond, eds. *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*.



Hawkins, Joan, ed. *Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975-2001*.



Smith, Patti. *Just Kids*.

"Je est un autre." ("I is another.")
—Arthur Rimbaud

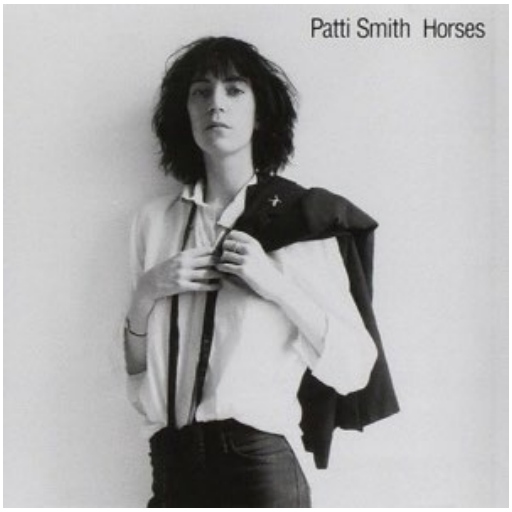
Patti Smith and David Bowie were born just days apart—Smith in December 1946 in the United States and Bowie in January 1947 in the United Kingdom—as members of the earliest cohort of the post-WWII baby boom. Both came from modest backgrounds and moved to the "big city" of New York and London respectively, getting a foothold in the world of arts and letters with Smith working in a Manhattan bookshop and Bowie at a Soho advertising agency. Soho, London, and SoHo, New York, share several common characteristics that attracted Smith and Bowie to these areas.



Bowie chic in one of Mr. Fish's man-dresses on the cover of his album *The Man Who Sold the World*.

While both Soho and SoHo have undergone extensive gentrification in recent years, their links to this world of avant-garde styles, subversive fashions, underground aesthetics, and personal rebellion remain. In London, the upscale musicals of the West End, the sleaze associated with the sex industry, and Chinatown border the neighborhood. In New York, SoHo, merging with Chelsea, the Bowery, Chinatown, Little Italy, Alphabet City, and, of course, Greenwich Village, lies at the heart of Downtown Manhattan, where small factories metamorphosed into haunts for avant-garde artists, dramaturges and musicians as the city evolved in the years after World War II. As opposed to highbrow Uptown and the glitz and commercial glamor of Times Square and Broadway in Midtown, Manhattan's Downtown attracts bohemians and marginalized voices on the cutting-edge of cultural innovations. In both London and New York, these urban incubators produced the stellar talents of the Baby Boom generation. Patti Smith and David Bowie found their creative peers in these trendy enclaves. Known today primarily as rock singer-songwriters, both Smith and Bowie had strong backgrounds in the visual arts, literature, and theatre, and they blossomed in these bastions of underground culture which fueled their multi-art and intermedia talents.

As fashion icons, Smith and Bowie provide a striking, symmetrically androgynous pair—Bowie chic in Mr. Fish's man-dresses and Smith elegant in thin trousers, narrow lapel jackets, and string ties. In the 1960s, the Women's Movement, Stonewall, and a deep disgust with the machismo associated with military operations in Vietnam set the stage for cultural experimentation with gender and



Patty Smith at her manly best in a portrait by photographer Robert Mapplethorpe on the cover of her album *Horses* (1975).



A. Craig Copetas brought Burroughs and Bowie together for *Rolling Stone* in 1974.

sexual orientation through style. However, when someone at a club asked Patti Smith if she was "androgynous," she had to ask what it meant. The reply was "You know, like Mick Jagger." (Smith, *Just Kids*, 140) David Bowie was not quite on the rock radar at the time. Smith continues, "Whatever it meant, with just a haircut, I miraculously turned androgynous overnight." (140) She also includes an amusing anecdote about her first meeting with poet Allen Ginsberg in which he mistakes her for a "very pretty boy" (123) and buys her a sandwich before realizing his error. In *David Bowie Is*, Mark Kermode quotes the star as saying, "I was the androgyne for the time" (284), and Bowie sings about gender-bending and sexual transgressions in songs such as "Rebel, Rebel" (1974) and "Jean Genie" (1972) with makeup, dyed hair, and extravagant costumes.

At the cusp of the sexual revolution, Smith and Bowie took enormous chances with gender norms and sexual identities. Bowie proudly proclaimed, "I am gay," in a 1972 *Melody Maker* interview. But his heterosexual marriages and children dampened the impact of the statement, and some gay men were turned off by his inauthenticity. Smith's lover Robert Mapplethorpe proved to be more convincing when he came out to her and challenged the world of photography with his sensuous images of flowers and penises. Tragically, Mapplethorpe died of AIDS in 1989, and Smith pays tender tribute to her friend, lover, and muse in her award-winning memoir *Just Kids* written roughly a decade after Mapplethorpe's passing. Beyond this, though, much like Hemingway's *Moveable Feast* (1964), *Just Kids* provides a portrait of a city at a particular moment in history by focusing on the bohemian personalities creating the avant-garde art and literature of their day. Like Hemingway, Smith sometimes spends too much time name-dropping, but her autobiographical account of her years on the Lower East Side can also be very tender and moving with vivid portraits of the feast of characters she encountered in New York's Soho and Greenwich Village.

Bowie and Smith shared many friends and acquaintances—William S. Burroughs, Iggy Pop, John Cale, and Lou Reed, among others. Smith and Burroughs struck up a friendship when both stayed at the Chelsea Hotel, and A. Craig Copetas brought Burroughs and Bowie together for *Rolling Stone* in 1974. When Burroughs pointed out to Bowie that he chose a surname associated with a "wild boy" knife that could cut both ways, the two became fast friends. Bowie used the author's aleatory cut-up technique on subsequent albums, working with Brian Eno who helped introduce the element of chance into their musical collaborations. In fact, assemblages and bricolage define both Smith and Bowie's aesthetic, and they freely borrow, quote, and allude to a wide range of other artists, musicians, and writers in their oeuvre.

Both admired Andy Warhol, The Factory, and The Velvet Underground,[1] [open endnotes in new window] and they spent some of their most productive years in New York City as part of the Downtown scene described in Joan Hawkins' anthology. They hung out with the Chelsea Hotel crowd and frequented Max's Kansas City, CBGB, and other venues favored by New York bohemians in the mid-1970s. However, they also had passionate attachments to continental Europe—Smith to Paris and Bowie to Berlin—as well as close ties to Ann Arbor-Detroit rock—Patti Smith married to Fred "Sonic" Smith (1980-1994) of the MC5 and Bowie rooming with Iggy Pop of The Stooges in West Berlin (1977-8).



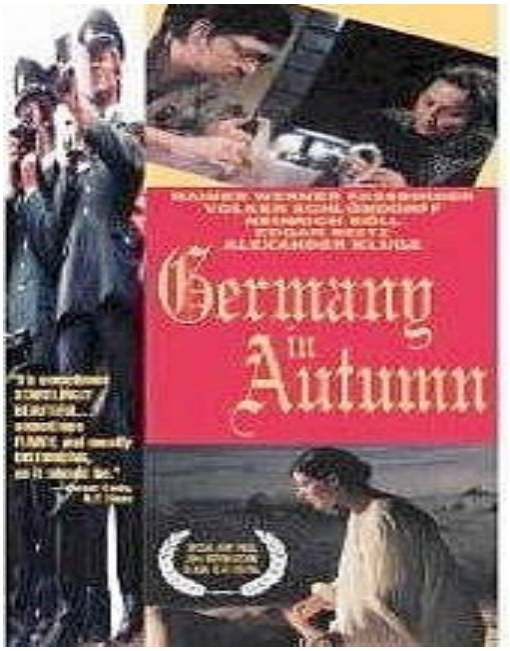
Patti Smith lionizes Arthur Rimbaud and many other French sexual "outlaws," who defy heteronormative, patriarchal constraints. She also greatly admires the rock and roll heroes of her generation, who found a home-away-from-home in the bohemian Paris in the years leading up to and following May 1968. She makes poetic pilgrimages to places such as Pere Lachaise Cemetery, where Jim Morrison and Oscar Wilde, among others, are buried, to pay tribute to her muses.



Bowie has a complicated relationship to Berlin and its music. During his time there, he melded his interests in Weimar figures such as Brecht and Weill with a recognition of the international popularity of electronic bands such as Kraftwerk. However, his flirtations with fascist aesthetics coincide with glam and punk's appropriation of Nazi imagery as a provocation to the older generation's glorification of their role in World War II.

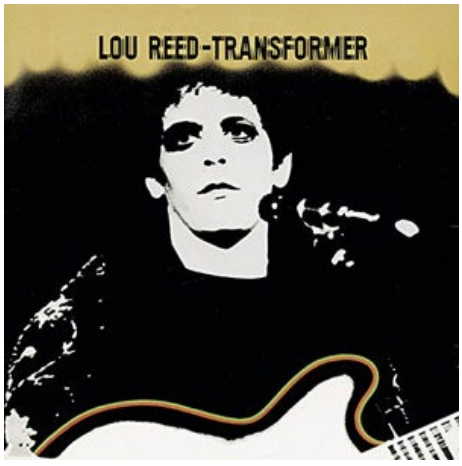
In fact, Bowie met Iggy Pop at Max's Kansas City, where Smith and Mapplethorpe were regulars, before meeting up with him again in Berlin. At points in their careers, Smith and Bowie performed Bertolt Brecht/Kurt Weill songs, and the impact of Weimar on their music, appearance, and performance style can be seen in their use of gender-bending expression of pre-Hitler Berlin's putative "decadence." Bob Fosse's film *Cabaret* (1972), based on Christopher Isherwood's Berlin stories, popularized Weimar style for a wider audience around the same time. In fact, Berlin plays such a formative role in Bowie's oeuvre, three chapters in *Enchanting David Bowie* by Jennifer Otter Bickerdike and John Charles Sparrowhawk, Tiffany Mainman, and Daryl Perrings, explore the star's relationship to West Berlin and the impact the divided city had on his career. [Image 4] Bowie produced Lou Reed's album *Transformer* (1972) in Berlin. On it, the song, "Walk on the Wild Side" references many of the transgender and gay personalities associated with Warhol's Factory—Holly Woodlawn, Candy Darling, Jackie Curtis, Joe Dellesandro, Joe Campbell ("Sugar Plum Fairy"), and Jackie Curtis—who also appear in Smith's *Just Kids*. In other words, Bowie's Berlin must be understood in relation to Downtown New York.

Citing their gender rebelliousness, critics and scholars link Smith and Bowie with the same progenitors including Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, Jean Cocteau, and other sexual "outlaws" questioning gender norms, heteronormativity, and the laws that govern our social bodies. From the visual arts, Smith and Bowie draw on Dada, Surrealism, the Pre-Raphaelites,



Going to the divided city of West Berlin during the Cold War continues that provocation through proximity to the Communist "enemy." However, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, and Bowie did not allude directly to the Baader Meinhof gang/Red Army faction or other radical political movements in their songs. For more on this period and the political climate in West Germany, see the omnibus film, *Germany in Autumn* (1978).

Aubrey Beardsley, the Vienna Secession and German Expressionism. They found inspiration at the fringes of popular culture from film noir to B-movie science fiction and horror. In *Just Kids*, Smith writes about going to Coney Island sideshows with Mapplethorpe, with Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) on their minds. David Bowie's album cover for *Diamond Dogs* (1974) in which his body merges with the hind quarters of a dog on display at a freak show indicates his thinking went along the same lines. New Yorker Susan Sontag wrote her essay on photographer Diane Arbus, "Freak Show," in 1973, and in a 1974 television appearance, David Bowie told Dick Cavett he had a book of Arbus' photographs on his coffee table. Leslie A. Fiedler published *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* in 1978, making a clear link between mainstream society's views of physical abnormalities and distain for youth subcultures by branding them "freaks."



David Bowie produced Lou Reed's Berlin album, *Transformer* (1972), featuring the hit song "Take a Walk on the Wild Side," about the "wild side" of Warhol's Factory on the Lower East Side rather than the wild West Side of Berlin.



Robert Mapplethorpe, Patti Smith, and David Bowie all found inspiration in Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) as they saw themselves and the way society viewed them reflected in Coney Island sideshows.



The spectacle of the animal-human hybrid parallels the hermaphrodite's gender hybridity on the cover of *Diamond Dogs* (1974).



From Ziggy Stardust to Thomas Jerome Newton in Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), Bowie embodies alienation through his space alien personae. He has a knack for looking in the mirror and seeing himself as an "Other." While not a novel experience for many women, teens, racial, ethnic and other minorities, it comes as an epiphany when experienced through the eyes of an adult, white male.

A symbol of alienated youth, Bowie took on the persona of aliens from outer space such as Ziggy Stardust and Thomas Jerome Newton in Nicolas Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), and his asymmetrical eyes analysed in detail by Kevin J. Hunt in *Enchanting David Bowie* became a key element in the mise-en-scene of Roeg's film. Smith, too, became an emblem of alienation, singing, "Baby was a black sheep, baby was a whore." As a teenage unwed mother who gave her baby up for adoption, she lived that song. Gender and the Atlantic separated Bowie and Smith, but the New York avant-garde and rock and roll in the mid-1970s brought them inextricably together as generational icons with enduring legacies.

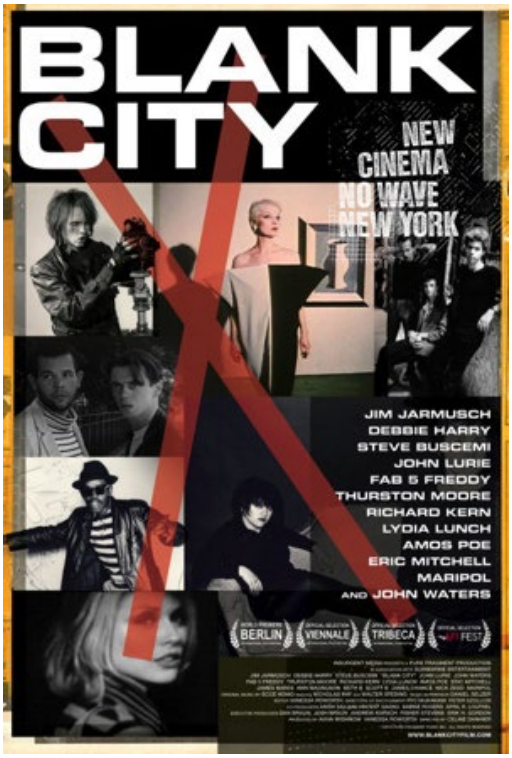
Taken together, the four books reviewed here provide portraits of these two extraordinary figures. However, more than that, each book opens a window onto a subcultural landscape that has not received the critical scrutiny it merits. Even though these books do not take up "subcultures" as their primary focus, the authors do recognize the significance of various subcultures to the film, media, visual and recording arts of the era. Joan Hawkins' *Downtown Film and TV Culture* (1975-2001) acknowledges the centrality of punk within the media arts community as well as the importance of LGBTQ subcultures after Stonewall in shaping the culture on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

In an interview included with Nick Zedd, known for coining the term "Cinema of Transgression"(1985), a manifesto written in the wake of the New York punk explosion, the filmmaker eloquently describes the role played by the urban underground in creating dissenting counter-discourses "through happenings, pranks, events, disruptions, satire, comedy and other forms of ridicule through skepticism." (216) Although Hawkins argues for "downtown" as a term extending beyond New York City to San Francisco, Los Angeles, Detroit, Chicago, and elsewhere, the vast majority of the book deals with Manhattan from the waning of Warhol's Factory before his death in 1987 to the AIDS epidemic and the rise of LGBTQ activism to counter the homophobia of the times. The fact Hawkins decided on 2001 with the 9/11 collapse of the Twin Towers as the terminus of the period again betrays the fact that the book really deals with Manhattan's media arts community and its particular blend of cosmopolitanism at its core.

As a consequence, *Downtown Film and TV Culture* serves as a perfect companion to Patti Smith's *Just Kids*, which extends the temporal frame back to 1967 when she first met Robert Mapplethorpe in the East Village, but really focuses on their emerging careers with the rise of punk, glitter, glam, and the sexual



Patti Smith writes about Ivan Kral as a talented musicians in *Just Kids*, but he emerges as a key punk filmmaker in his collaboration with Amos Poe on *The Blank Generation* (1976)—a home movie-rock documentary-avant-garde hybrid that helped to disseminate New York punk style.



Juan Carlos Kase castigates Celine Danhier's *Blank City* (2010) for its shallow treatment of New York's punk/"no wave" scene. However, he fails to adequately address the continuing appeal of these films to today's women filmmakers, who gain inspiration from New York's punk

transgressions associated with queer culture in the mid-1970s overshadowed by the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s, coming to a close for Smith around the time she married Fred "Sonic" Smith in 1980 and Mapplethorpe's death in 1989. Arguably, the overlapping years in downtown Manhattan from 1975-1990 provide the clearest picture of the ways in which punk, glitter, glam, and its associated queer subcultural expressions transformed the New York avant-garde and rewired the connections between music, fashion, film, graphic arts and youth culture. The Hawkins' anthology examines phenomena only touched on in Smith's account, but Smith's ability to delve into her own psychic engagement with the Downtown literary, fine arts, and rock culture of the time adds considerable emotional depth to many of the films, videos, television broadcasts, and other motion pictures discussed by the contributors to *Downtown Film and TV Culture*. As women, too, Hawkins and Smith help to shape a picture of the Downtown New York arts world that shows how differently men and women, gay and straight, experienced the punk and glitter/glam subcultures at the time.

Ivan Kral and Amos Poe's 16mm, black and white, non-sync, non-fiction rock music feature, *Blank Generation* (1976), brings the subcultures together on screen through what the directors termed "presence" filmmaking, and several of the chapters in *Downtown Film and TV Culture* return to that seminal film. Kral served as Patti Smith's guitarist, and, in *Just Kids*, she describes how she found him through an ad she placed in the *Village Voice*, since the other musicians who applied had not "warmed up to the idea of a girl being the leader." (Smith 244) Kral had left his native Czechoslovakia after the Soviet crackdown on the Prague Spring in 1968, and he played guitar for Smith, Blondie, and Iggy Pop in Manhattan.

Smith does not talk about *Blank Generation* in *Just Kids*, but a brief artist's statement by Ivan and his wife Cindy Kral on the genesis of his collaboration with Amos Poe in Hawkins' anthology fills in some essential information about the easy access he had to his fellow musicians even with his "physically intrusive" Bolex (Kral, and Kral 58) and cassette recorder. Shooting the bands playing in venues such as CBGB in 1974-75, Kral performs onstage, hangs out with his bandmates, observes his fellow musicians as a "home movie" filmmaker, and participates as a member of the audience actively shaping the subculture. His "presence" says quite a lot about the punk aesthetic, since his participation in *Blank Generation* speaks to the fluid borders between music and motion pictures as well as to punk's raw DIY style, disregard for convention, and blurring of the boundaries between performer, fan, and observer. *Downtown Film and TV Culture* also includes a thorough analysis of *Blank Generation*'s significance by Mark Benedetti, an appraisal of its continuing circulation in the digital age by Laurel Westrup, and a very acerbic denunciation of its citation in Celine Danhier's *Blank City* (2010) by Juan Carlos Kase. In fact, Kase dismisses Danhier's film as an "anodyne, anemic document."

As a French documentarist with no formal training in cinema, Danhier came to her subject as an admirer of American independent auteurs such as Jim Jarmusch (Gustason, "Celine Danhier Draws a 'Blank'"). Working with producers Aviva Wishnow and Vanessa Roworth, Danhier managed to cajole many of the major figures associated with New York punk/no wave/Cinema of Transgression/ Downtown films of the 1970s and 1980s into appearing in the documentary and lending some very rare footage for the project. What seems to be missing in Kase's assessment of Danhier's film as well in most of the commentary on *Blank*

performers and filmmakers because these punk women broke so many barriers to female artistic freedom in the 1970s and 1980s.

Generation is the way in which Kral and Poe's raw, out-of-sync, hand-held, participatory film highlights the ways in which rock brought together diverse stakeholders in a scene that challenged gender norms and sexual mores in such aggressive terms.

This may be the one of the reasons why the female production team of *Blank City* gravitated toward this particular moment in New York's independent film history. In *Blank City*, Debbie Harry, lead singer of the New Wave band Blondie, talks about feeling "like our lives were movies" and that the scene was "cinematic," alluding to the way she crafted her stage persona as a pastiche of Hollywood's "dumb blonde" / "blonde bombshell." Patti Smith, explosive even out of sync in *Blank Generation*, represents hyper-feminine Harry's punk polar opposite as the dark, brooding androgyne. Bands closer to glam such as The New York Dolls and transgender performer Wayne (Jayne) County also appear in *Blank Generation*. Even though the film's title comes from Richard Hell's punk lament that "we belong to the blank generation,"[2] the performers on stage as well as the members of the audience expand beyond punk and provide a capacious picture of Lower Manhattan that includes gender-benders and sexual outlaws involved in glitter and glam, punk, and intersecting subcultures forming what Hawkins rightly sees as the Downtown "scene" (xi).



The David Bowie Is exhibition organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London draws on the performer's extensive collection to chronicle his rise to stardom through carefully selected artifacts.

David Bowie Is and *Enchanting David Bowie* speak to each other in an even more obvious fashion than *Downtown Film and TV Culture* and *Just Kids*. In 2013, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London mounted an ambitious exhibition devoted to David Bowie, sponsored by the German audio company Sennheiser and the Italian fashion house Gucci, highlighting the importance of the cultural icon as both sound and image. The lavishly illustrated *David Bowie Is* catalogues the exhibit with an emphasis on Bowie's contribution to aural and visual design through materials displayed from his own archive. The exhibit opened after the launch of the album *The Next Day* in January 2013, Bowie's first studio release in a decade. Two academic anthologies came in the wake of the album release and exhibition, *Enchanting David Bowie* and *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power, both published in 2015. While this review deals only with *Enchanting David Bowie* , the latter anthology needs to be mentioned, since both books appear at the same time and take note of Bowie's career as summed up in the Victoria and Albert Exhibition[3] and relaunched with *The New Day*. The overlap between the two books indicates the existence of a coterie of scholars devoted to David Bowie in the emerging field of celebrity studies, characterized by an interdisciplinary blending of music, film, media, fashion, design, entertainment industry and cultural studies. (Another scholarly book, *Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie*, by Shelton Waldrep, also appeared in 2015, published by Bloomsbury.) Authors contributing to both books include Ian Chapman, Tiffany Naiman, Dene October, Tanja Stark,[4]and Helene Marie Thian. *David Bowie Is*, as a museum catalogue, stands apart from the academic anthologies, since it relies on curators, music critics, and popular commentators for the preponderance of its material.

Even though *David Bowie Is* and *Enchanting David Bowie* organize their subject matter within very different conceptual frames, the books cover many of the same themes and topics, including Bowie's cut-up aesthetics and postmodern assemblage, the centrality of Berlin to the development of the star's career, the visual design of his album covers, his feature film roles, space aliens and youth alienation, and, of course, his androgynous star image and sexual allure. Both books, too, follow many of the themes set by the curators at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The first section of *Enchanting David Bowie* on "Space" parallels Geoffrey Marsh's essay entitled "Astronaut of Inner Spaces" in *David Bowie Is*. The third section on the "Body" expands on many of the points made by Camille

Paglia in “Theatre of Gender: David Bowie at the Climax of the Sexual Revolution” in the catalogue. Victoria Broackes’ “Putting Out Fire with Gasoline: Designing David Bowie” and Oriole Cullen’s “Changes: Bowie’s Life Story” in *David Bowie Is* resonate with Helene Marie Thian’s analysis of Bowie’s jacket. Album covers serve as the focus of Ian Chapman’s and Tanja Stark’s chapters in *Enchanting David Bowie* as well as Christopher Breward’s piece in the catalogue.



Image of Bowie in “Prison Cell Pieta” from Tanja Stark’s “Confronting Bowie’s Mysterious Corpses”

In fact, a striking difference between the two books involves illustrations. Even though so much of the scholarship in *Enchanting David Bowie* relies on visual analysis of the star’s films, album covers, publicity materials, and other visual representations, the book has few images and no photographs of Bowie himself. I assume this has to do with copyright, but I found it frustrating to turn to the Internet or the *David Bowie Is* catalogue in order to follow the authors’ arguments in *Enchanting David Bowie*. Tanja Stark has her chapter up on her website, so I just read her piece with the images in situ on the Internet. [https://tanjastark.com/2014/10/20/confronting-bowies-mysterious-corpses-2/] Ironically, the question of digital reproduction and the mashup in relation to copyrighted material comes up explicitly in Christopher Moore’s chapter, “2004 (Bowie vs. Mashup),” about the contest the star ran for his fans in which “subscribers to Bowie’s website BowieNet were offered the chance to create copyright-friendly Bowie mashups and enter the ‘Never Follow’ competition to win an Audi TT coupe, Sony VAIO laptop and licensed copies of industry recognized digital audio software.” (162) However, entrants could only use specific versions of Bowie’s songs for their mashups, and they signed away any rights they may have to their creations in order to participate. In this chapter, Moore takes an ironic look at Bowie’s own cut-up appropriations in relation to the limitations he placed on the digital subcultural expressions of his fans.

Both volumes on David Bowie solicit personal responses from many of their contributors as Bowie “fans” or witnesses to the various time periods that marked his lengthy career. This can be seen clearly in the transcription of a roundtable discussion with Christopher Frayling, Philip Hoare, Mark Kermode, and Geoffrey Marsh in *David Bowie Is*. In *Enchanting David Bowie*, the editors make this an explicit part of their methodological strategy:

> “In preparing the manuscript, we also asked our contributors to reflect

> back upon their very thoughts and responses to our call for contributions, summarizing these for inclusion in the volume. We have included these personal accounts as part of the respective sections herein. The volume is a labour of love and our authors demonstrate this through the way they personally reflect upon the reasons they individually felt inspired to write about the enchantment of David Bowie." (5)

Several of the authors in both books mention that they remember retreating to their bedrooms as teenagers to listen to Bowie, who spoke directly to their questions about gender, sexuality, identity, alienation and angst, taboo topics in their household. As Geoffrey Marsh shows in *David Bowie Is*, the star was quite aware of this aspect of the domestic "psychogeography" (27) of his appeal. Marsh quotes Bowie as saying: "I had to retreat into my room; so you get in the room and you carry that ruddy room around with you for the rest of your life." (28) The adolescent bedroom of the mind, then, provides the imaginative common ground for Bowie, his listeners, and the scholars who comment on his cultural significance.

Fans, enchanted by stars, often describe this illusion of intimacy; however, "enchantment" with Bowie may not be the best foundation for a critical appraisal of either his popular appeal or artistic contribution. As a catalogue for a museum exhibition celebrating the star, *David Bowie Is* may not be the best place to look for any sharp criticism of the celebrity, and Bowie's direct involvement made it virtually impossible. However, the tension between academic detachment and personal investment plagues cultural studies more generally, and this has long been a sore point in subcultural studies, which can tend to be more celebratory and sympathetic than probing and analytical. *Just Kids*, of course, is a memoir with no pretext of objectivity or academic utility; however, it still offers insight that eludes scholars who did not experience living at the Chelsea Hotel in the 1970s. However, some of the contributors to *Enchanting David Bowie* sometimes appear to be too invested in the celebrities as fans rather than academics, and *Downtown Film and TV Culture* does a better job of pairing scholarly appraisals with personal testimony of filmmakers, videographers, and archivists. Taken together, however, all four books illuminate the importance of key celebrities such as Bowie, Mapplethorpe, and Smith as well as provide valuable insight into the subcultural expressions of the 1970s and 1980s.

Bringing Patti Smith and David Bowie together in this review of these four books shows how punk, glitter, and glam in New York and London helped to transform the sexual and gender norms in arts and entertainment during this period. However, as the differences in their careers suggest, a gender hierarchy remained in place—gradually changing with the popularity of Madonna and Lady Gaga. Although Smith and Bowie both attacked sexual boundaries through rock and roll often in the same place at precisely the same moment in time, Bowie became a megastar and Smith remained essentially "just" a "kid." This, of course, says a lot about gender inequality in rock music, but it also points to the distinct ways in which the same "message" of gender rebellion and sexual liberation erupted from two very different subcultures. Patti Smith serves as a "punk poetess," while Bowie reigns as the glitter chameleon of glam rock.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

On sex, gender, and spectacular subcultures



A bohemian hangout for decades, the Chelsea Hotel served as the epicenter for New York's punk, glitter and glam subcultures in the 1970s and 1980s.



Dick Hebdige's key work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) brought punk, in particular, to academic attention with a novel reading of youth culture that celebrated the depth

At the same time punk, glitter, and glam appeared on both sides of the Atlantic, scholars in England, associated with Birmingham and Open Universities, began to reevaluate the ways in which sociologists looked at youth culture. Drawn primarily to the spectacular street subcultures in postwar Britain such as the Mods, rockers, Teddy Boys, and punks, scholars such as Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Dick Hebdige brought Marxism, structuralism, ethnography, and media theory together to look at youth in terms of cultural difference rather than juvenile delinquency. Although Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber did write on girls and subcultures, most of this scholarship dealt with young men and their investment in ostentatious styles that separated them structurally from mass-mediated consumerism as well as the working-class culture of their parents.

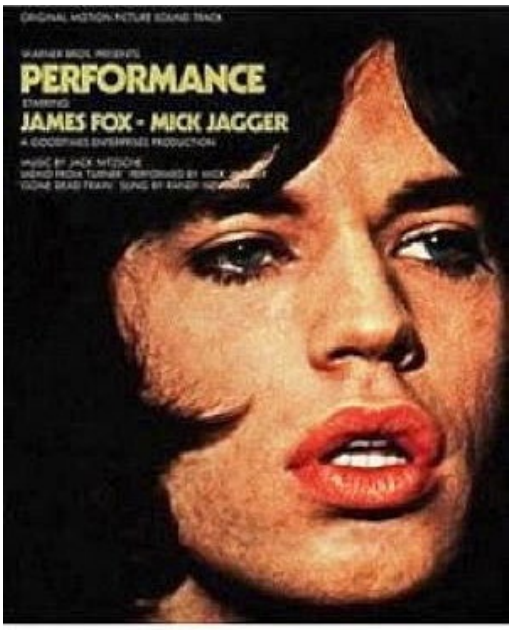
Since the 1970s, research on subcultures has expanded, and several of the authors in *Downtown Film and TV Culture*, *David Bowie Is*, and *Enchanting David Bowie* explore the relationship between star image and youth culture through style. In *David Bowie Is*, Jon Savage, for example, references cultural studies research done by Stanley Cohen and Dick Hebdige and explores Bowie's image relative to glam, Mod, punk, and various gay subcultures that intersected with the star's career. Speaking of the evolution of Bowie in relation to these subcultures, Savage observes:

> "His relationship to youth subcultures is complex and fascinating, as it shadows his development as an artist and a mass-media performer. He begins as a follower, trying things out before he begins to find his individual voice; he then becomes an outsider, as he attempts to develop that voice; when he finds it, he becomes a leader—creating youth culture in his own image." (103)

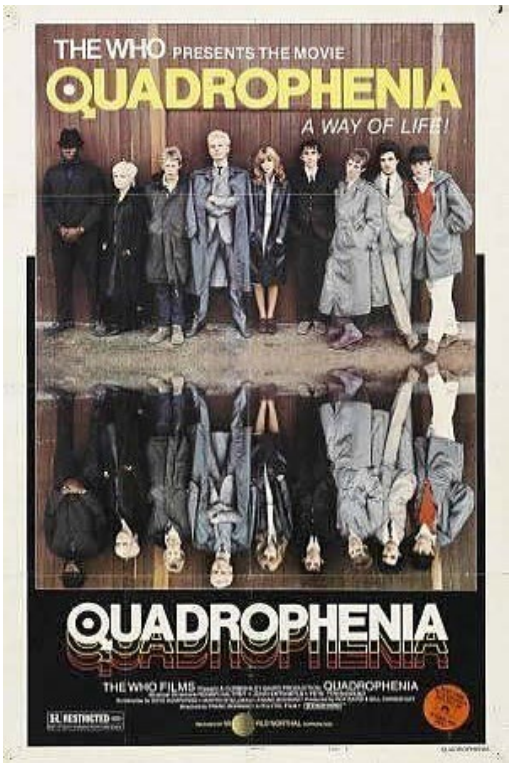
For Bowie, this meant taking a leading role in the development of glitter and glam.

Punk and glitter/glam coexisted in the 1970s as extraordinarily fecund youth subcultural styles. They concretized a sensibility associated with post-Vietnam, Watergate, moral, political, and economic exhaustion in the United States and the waning days of Swinging London on the other side of the Atlantic. Many aspects of punk, glitter and glam drew on earlier subcultures—particularly the Hippies in the United States and the Mods in the United Kingdom. In America, the Hippies sported long hair, torn jeans, love beads as a unisex rebellion against the military draft of the Vietnam War era by going as far as possible away from crisp military uniforms and crewcuts as possible. Looking like a "girl" meant not being part of the American war in Vietnam. In England, some of this unisex Hippie style merged with Mod dandyism, creating a trans-Atlantic androgynous style typified by Mick Jagger's use of makeup, lace, soft fabrics, bright colors, and long hair. Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell's film *Performance* (1970) starring Mick Jagger as the gender-bending bisexual rock star Turner exemplifies this aspect of subcultural style. Turner, much like Bowie's stage persona Ziggy Stardust, and space alien Thomas Jerome Newton played by Bowie in Nicolas Roeg's science fiction feature *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), has a malleable identity that

of meaning inherent in seemingly ephemeral, subversive, urban street styles.



Mick Jagger is the gender-bending, bisexual, hedonistic, rock star hippie par excellence in Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell's film *Performance* (1970).



transcends traditional gender norms as well as considerable personal charm and sexual charisma.

For both Jagger and Bowie, Mods played a key role in the fashioning of their gender-bending styles. In the 1960s, Mods[5] [open notes in new window] rebelled by dressing in flamboyant suits, ties, and colorful jackets as a concrete stylistic expression symbolizing transcendence of the working-class boundaries of their parents' generation by parroting the fashions associated with the gentry. For the Mods and other subcultures, as Dick Hebdige points out in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, self-fashioning allowed for rebellion by reworking commercially produced articles in subversive ways. In his chapter in *Enchanting David Bowie*, Christopher Moore draws on Hebdige to underscore the importance of subcultural bricolage to Bowie's identity formation as the star repurposes symbolic commodities, usurps commercial fashions, subverts accepted meanings attached to mass-produced objects, and provides alternative styles through these transgressive cultural re-appropriations.

In her essay in the anthology, "David Bowie Is… Customizing," Helene Marie Thian takes a close look at one of David Bowie's jackets to show how the Mod practice of customizing clothing with printers' ink gave the aspiring musician a way of connecting and commenting on male fashion through Op Art stripes. Thian argues that Bowie's jacket not only marks his individual interest in self-fashioning and control over the details of his public image, but also betrays his debt to the Mod subculture which referenced the "dandy' in a collective statement against social expectations that working-class men should be "macho." She says of the jacket:

> "It is also a statement rooted in the subculture movement of the mods and their customization of clothing for the purpose of bonding as a social group to expand the boundaries of acceptable limits of self-presentation for working-class men in Britain in the 60s." (239)

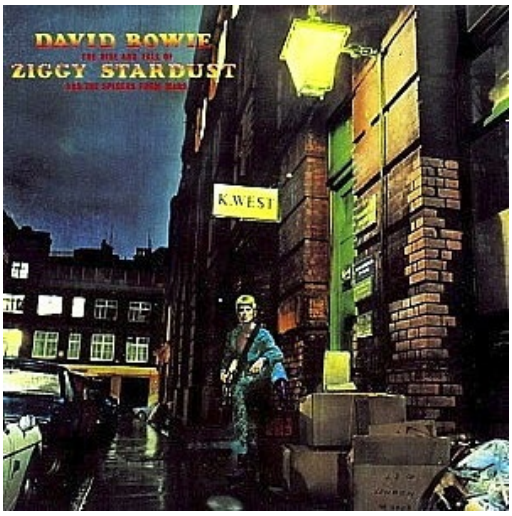
The exaggerated elegance of the Mods morphed into the glam rock style of Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music and Marc Bolan of T. Rex in England, and Hippie androgyny paved the way for glitter rock with Gary Glitter in the U.K. and Iggy Pop, Alice Cooper and Wayne (Jayne) County and the New York Dolls. As Christopher Moore notes, Bowie's "mod persona was less occupied with class than it was with gender…" (159), and gender and sexual orientation, rather than class, set the stage for Bowie's global popularity.

For Ian Chapman, the cover design of the album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) resonates with the glam subculture's fascination with glittering super-stars:

> "Glam rock, circa 1971-75 (approximately) offered its followers an escape from the confinement, drudgery and physical, mental and emotional restrictions of the inner city and suburbia. The wider reinventive promise of glam rock was that one could transcend one's immediate physical, social and even sexual environment to construct a new idealized version of the self." (35)

In his chapter on Bowie's cover versions of songs by other artists in *Enchanting David Bowie*, David Baker argues that the songs in the *Pin Ups* (1973) album "are homage and acknowledgement to the specific music that influenced and formed 'glam' Bowie…." (111) Glenn D'Cruz argues for a broader view of Bowie's star persona in relation to glam and glitter in his analysis of Todd Haynes' feature *Velvet Goldmine* (1998). The lead character, Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys Meyers), like Bowie, has a space alien stage persona "Maxwell Demon," who dies at the

For a cinematic glimpse of the Mod subculture, see *Quadrophenia* (Franc Roddam, 1979), based on The Who's rock opera of the same name.



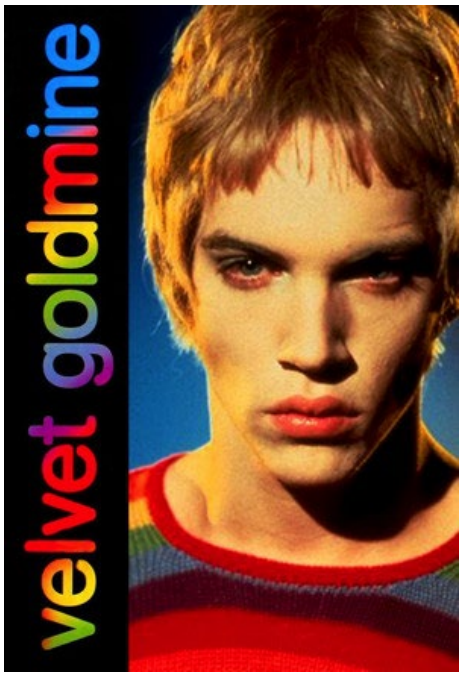
Glam and glitter from outer space to the streets of London on the cover of *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972).

height of his rock music career. Bowie, of course, famously killed off his alter ego Ziggy Stardust when he decided to move on to the next phase of his career. Other characters in the *Velvet Goldmine* resemble Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, Brian Eno, and Bowie's first wife, Angela Bowie.

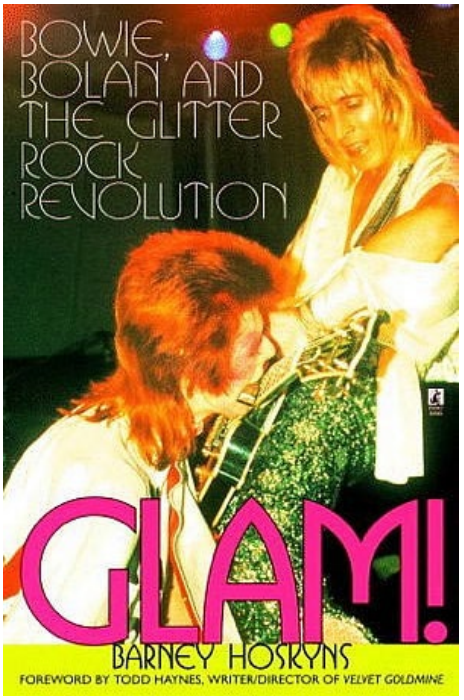
According to D'Cruz, Haynes did considerable research with rock music journalist Barney Hoskyns, who wrote a book on the subculture's history, *Glam! Bowie, Bolan and the Glitter Rock Revolution*, timed for publication with the release of the film. D'Cruz states: "Glam rock was a seismic event, for Haynes and Hoskyns, because it shook the heterosexual foundations of society in general by, paradoxically, appealing to heterosexual boys…." (260) However, as D'Cruz rightly points out, the film does not unequivocally celebrate glam and glitter as politically progressive. In the film, Haynes critiques the subculture's superficial, narcissistic, excessively materialistic, and self-destructive tendencies, and D'Cruz argues that the film's "ambivalence about sexual identity, politics and the transformative potential of popular culture is perhaps its greatest contribution to our understanding of the cultural significance of David Bowie." (271) Ironically, the closest *Enchanting David Bowie* comes to being disenchanted with the star is in a chapter about a film in which Bowie does not appear.

Punk traces its trans-Atlantic genealogy differently from glam and glitter. Expressing frustration with the economic, social, and spiritual cul-de-sac that confronted British and American youth in the 1970s, punk champions an aggressive, "bad" attitude associated with violent outbursts on stage, in bars, and on the streets; a raw DIY trash aesthetic; and, an uncompromising commitment to shout about taboo topics and extreme feelings of alienation and despair. In *David Bowie Is*, Jon Savage notes the influence Bowie had on the emerging punk subculture by channeling William S. Burroughs' homoerotic *The Wild Boys: A Book of the Dead* (1971) and the dapper droogies of Stanley Kubrick's film adaptation (1971) of Anthony Burgess' dystopian novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) for a younger generation:

> "Within five years of Ziggy, the punks were enacting The Wild Boys on the streets of London, Manchester, Liverpool and other cities in Britain—as if to promote and preview an inevitable collapse of society. Many accounts of punk accentuate its social realism, but it also had a very strong science fiction element—projecting into a conceivable nightmare future." (103)



Glenn D'Cruz talks about the present absence of David Bowie in his perceptive analysis of Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998).



Barney Hoskyns' book, *Glam! Bowie, Bolan and the Glitter Rock Revolution*, serves as a companion to Haynes'film—filling in the historical blanks in the film's narrative.

Punk rocker Siouxsie Sioux mentions Bowie and glam icon Bryan Ferry as influences. Bowie, however, claims to have missed direct contact with the subculture in London and New York because he lived in Berlin when punk explored in the United States and the United Kingdom: "I really regret missing out on that. I'd love to have seen the dialogue on television... and the feel of the clubs at that time." (257) Christopher Breward, however, sees a significant change in Bowie as punk overtook glam and glitter:

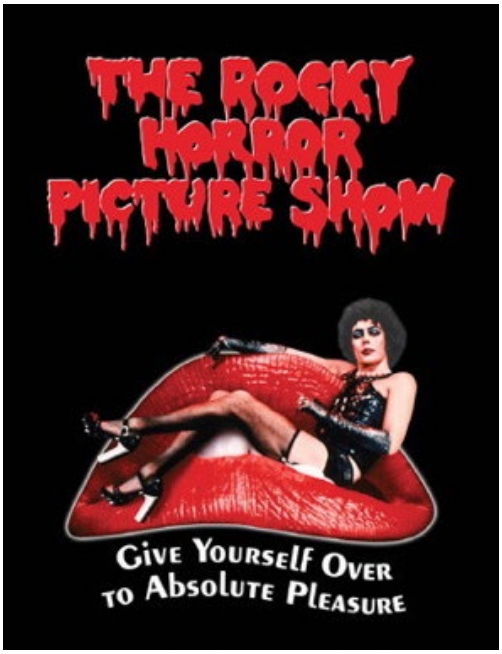
> "And though Bowie later disavowed that punk held any sway over him, its visual codes and nihilistic nastiness did seem to herald the coming of the end of glam aesthetics for something far more disturbing." (198)

Glam continued to be a cultural force, however, overlapping the popularity of punk.

Glitter and glam experienced a resurgence, for example, with successful midnight screenings of the glam rock musical *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), directed by Jim Sherman and based on a British science fiction/horror spoof by playwright Richard O'Brien. The film version stars Tim Curry, reprising his



Many of Siouxie Sioux's sartorial choices show traces of Bowie's signature style.



Tim Curry as the "sweet transvestite from Transylvania" in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975).

London stage role, as a "sweet transvestite from Transylvania," and the film attracted a cult following of devoted fans who lined up in costume at the Waverly Theatre in New York's Greenwich Village beginning in 1976. Drawing on glitter/glam style from both sides of the Atlantic, *Rocky Horror* devotees crossed-dressed as their favorite performers, participated in the film's pan-sexual fantasies, sang along and talked back to the characters on screen. In addition to drawing on gay male subcultural tropes such as the male bodybuilder and drag queen, the film also recognized female sexual desire in a refreshingly direct way with the character Janet (Susan Sarandon) given a solo in which she signs, "Touch-a-touch-a-touch me. I want to be dirty." As Christopher Breward points out in *David Bowie Is*, Pierre La Roche, who worked with David Bowie on his stage make-up, also designed the make-up for *Rocky Horror*, and the connection between Bowie's gender-bending and Curry's interpretation of the character of Frank-N-Furter—also an androgynous, bisexual space alien who sings rock and roll—seems clear.

In *Just Kids*, Patti Smith does not talk about punk, glitter, or glam at all. A poet, actress, and graphic artist, she came to music comparatively late. Her rudimentary musical education derived from avidly following, like most in her generation, the careers of her rock idols (Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, Grace Slick, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Kris Kristofferson, Bruce Springsteen), many of whom she had met in person. For Smith, Downtown Manhattan serves as an arts incubator, and she sees herself as part of a countercultural continuity that extends from the beat poets and Abstract Expressionists to Warhol, Mapplethorpe, and her own oeuvre without any clear subcultural rift. However, the punk subculture gave her club venues, an audience, and creative opportunities she likely would not have had otherwise. Because of punk's DIY raw aesthetic and support for intermedial experimentation, lack of formal musical training did not stop Smith from forming a band, and she tacitly recognizes that she was part of a broader movement in *Just Kids*. For example, Smith eloquently describes her feelings playing at Max's Kansas City and CBGBs with punk/new wave bands such as Television:

> "We imagined ourselves as the Sons of Liberty with a mission to preserve, protect, and project the revolutionary spirit of rock and roll. We feared that the music which had given us sustenance was in danger of spiritual starvation. We feared it losing its sense of purpose, we feared it falling into fattened hands, we feared it floundering in a mire of spectacle, finance, and vapid technical complexity. We would call forth in our minds the image of Paul Revere, riding through the American night, petitioning the people to wake up, to take up arms. We too would take up arms, the arms of our generation, the electric guitar and the microphone.... CBGB was the ideal place to sound a clarion call. It was a club on the street of the downtrodden that drew a strange breed who welcomed artists yet unsung." (245)

Even though Smith identifies with the "sons" rather than the "daughters" of



Rocky Horror in Greenwich Village at the Waverly Theater in 1976.



Vivienne Dick, born in Ireland, provides another example of the European-American cinematic cross-fertilization occurring within the New York super-8 punk filmmaking scene at the time. Films such as *She Had Her Gun Already* (1978) also illustrate the ways in which women collaborated within these subcultural artistic circles. Pat Place contemplates her next move in *She Had Her Gun Already*.



Lydia Lunch cultivates her own "blank" stare in *She Had Her Gun Already*.

liberty, she describes a punk rock incubator that gave many female musicians their start and set the stage for women to emerge within a punk subculture that allowed them to express their dissatisfaction with consumer-defined feminine ideals by wearing torn jeans, streaked makeup, studded leather, safety pin accessories, lingerie and various props appropriated from sadomasochistic porn and bondage subcultures. Smith voices the anger of her generation in a way that speaks to women in a particularly poignant way. For a working-class Catholic girl to get up and sing in "Gloria" that "Jesus died for somebody's sins but not mine" required considerable temerity. However, Smith was not the only angry woman to take the stage and make the scene in Manhattan at the time.

To Hawkins' considerable credit, she provides much needed gender balance to the extant scholarship on subcultures and media arts in *Downtown Film and TV Culture*. Even though key subcultural scholars are conspicuous by their absence (Hebdige, for example, only makes a brief appearance on pp. 328-9), subcultural communities, with shared oppositional aesthetic practices and collective styles, and women as well as sexual minorities attracted to the arts scene in Lower Manhattan take pride of place in her book. Hawkins includes reprints of two classic articles written at the time punk/New Wave erupted on screen in bars, discos, clubs, in underground cinemas, as part of performances, and in other alternative screening venues. A Jack Smith/Lou Reed/John Cale collaborator, Tony Conrad, who passed away in April 2016, brings his background as an electronic musician championing minimalism, structural filmmaker associated with "flicker" films, and experimental performance/video arts to his appraisal of the small-gauge films made in the mid-1970s. In "At Last Real Movies: Super-8 Cinema from New York," Conrad does a superb job of articulating the relationship between the subculture, New Wave music, and New York underground filmmaking:

> "(1) the films are often shown like TV in a bar, on a video projector; (2) the most unvarnished raw energy work is welling up out of the same geographic and social source as the old 'underground' (the lower East Side), and (3) so many of the new directors are European." (24)

Conrad picks up on the European origins of the filmmakers, which Jonathan Everett Haynes expands on his analysis of Amos Poe's *Unmade Beds* (1976) bringing New York's punk/New Wave music and No Wave film into conversation with Godard and the French New Wave. Chris Dumas makes a similar gesture in his chapter, which compares Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982) with Todd Haynes's unapologetic homoerotic aesthetics and the birth of what B. Ruby Rich terms the New Queer Cinema.[6] Tony Conrad seems to agree with programmer Edit deAk that the super-8 films should be called "New Wave," since "[t]here are no—and there have never been—punks in New York." (26) However, this really belies the fact that, in music, film, fashion, and through subcultural style, the trans-Atlantic conversation between young artists and musicians in Europe and the United States cannot be denied. Many of these filmmakers come from Europe, and they congregated on the Lower East Side at the same time that American bands, such as the Ramones, who championed a raw, stripped down, style of aggressive punk rock toured in the United Kingdom.



Amos Poe's *Unmade Beds* (1976) brings the French New Wave and New York's No Wave into bed together on screen.



Pat Place and Lydia Lunch bring punk out of the streets and clubs and put it up on the screen in James Nares' *Rome '78* (1978).

Even though labels vary, the connection between music, video, dance, sartorial style, performance art and specific New York venues such as the Mudd Club and CBGBs remains clear. Conrad singles out Lydia Lunch's performance in James Nares' *Rome '78* (1978) for comment: "Lydia Lunch, the most consistently intense personality of first-rank New Wave genius, is here, all akimbo, slinky and slimy...." (26) Conrad does not mention it, but perhaps the most striking aspect of this program is the fact that so many of the films are directed by women—Becky Johnston, Tina L'Hotsky, Laura Kennedy, Pat Place, Ellen Cooper, Cara Perlman, and Kiki Smith. As this shows, punk opened up avenues for women to express transgressive, violent anger with the sexual status quo through media in which they had been traditionally underrepresented, including hard rock, avant-garde cinema, and performance art.



No Wavelength: The Para-Punk Underground

If the films of the '60s avant-garde were often displaced orgies, the new super-8 films are shot through with fantasies of punishment and revenge.

ARTS

By J. Hoberman

J. Hoberman defines punk film in "No Wavelength: The Para-Punk Underground," which originally appeared in the Village Voice in 1979.

The other article anthologized here, J. Hoberman's "No Wavelength: The Para-Punk Underground," which originally appeared in the Village Voice in 1979, stands as perhaps the most referenced essay on New York punk cinema in print. Many of the other contributors to the book cite Hoberman, and, as Mark Benedetti points out in his chapter, "Canonization and No Wave Cinema History," it serves as one of the principal texts used to create a "canon." Benedetti's decision to call these films "no wave" rather than "punk" or "New Wave" or merging them with the later Cinema of Transgression or with earlier New York underground movements testifies to the centrality of Hoberman's analysis of the super-8 film explosion that coincided with the visibility of punk music and fashion around 1977. In his essay, Hoberman makes a compelling case for the intermedial merger of these films with punk music, performance, and visual arts. As he sees it:

> "Closely linked to local art-punk, no-wave bands, these film-makers parallel the music's energy, iconography, and aggressive anyone-can-do-it aesthetic, while using the performers themselves as a kind of ready-made pool of dramatic talent... The existence of punk bohemia, the cross-fertilization of avant-garde rock and post-conceptual art... and the proliferation of sync-sound Super 8mm cameras have stimulated a number of young artists and musicians over the last year to produce a new wave of content-rich, performance-oriented narrative films." (15)



Hoberman also displays a clear sense of the punk aesthetic that animates these films. Likely with glitter and glam in mind, he contrasts "camp"[7] with punk:

> "For the pseudo-aristocratic camp sensibility, the key element in American popular culture is its mass-produced glamour; for pseudo-lumpen punk, it is America's mass-produced sleaze... Camp's vanguard

Beth B and Scott B's *Black Box* (1978) offers Lydia Lunch another opportunity to tell film viewers to "shut up and suffer."



Inspired by an actual torture device called the Refrigerator, *Black Box* moves ambiguously between exposing unethical interrogation techniques (tame by post-9/11 standards) and offering a voyeuristic peak inside the world of sado-masochistic sex play. The punk slippage between B-movie punk pleasure and political satire gives the film its underground shock value.

> subculture was the homosexual; punk's is the alienated urban teen. The secret star of camp is the female impersonator; the sacred monster of punk is the dominatrix. Camp was obsessed with sexuality as a style; punk is obsessed with the aesthetics of violence." (18)

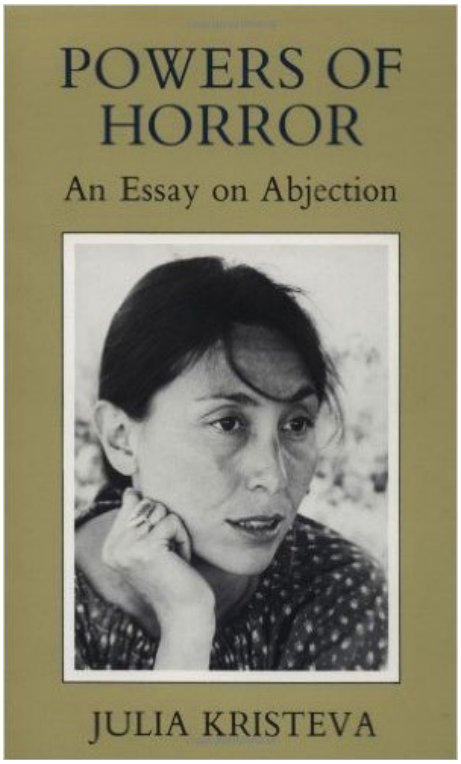
Both subcultural styles involve androgyny, so the effeminized Bowie represents the campy qualities of the glam/glitter subculture and the masculinized Smith performs the anger associated with punk. Arguably, the Downtown scene described by the authors included in Hawkins' anthology, paved the way for a productive dialogue between gay and straight communities that fueled activism around AIDS as well as the development of "queer" as a way of thinking about sexuality and gender beyond heterosexist norms.

With the exception of James Nares' *Rome '78*, Hoberman does not write about the same films as Conrad;[8] however, like Conrad, Hoberman showcases female filmmakers (Beth B—partnered with Scott B—and Vivienne Dick, in particular), without commenting on the relative visibility of women behind the camera in punk vis-à-vis American avant-garde cinema more generally. David Sterritt's chapter, "In the Movie-Viewing Machine: Essential Cinema in the 1970s" allows for a comparison between the earlier underground and the punk new wave/no wave. As Sterritt shows, the number of women involved in New York institutions such as Anthology Film Archive and circulated as part of the Essential Cinema Repertory (no women/five men on the selection committee) was miniscule—a handful of female luminaries such as Maya Deren and Marie Menken making the cut—when compared with the significance of women in the New York punk subculture's motion picture circles.

Moreover, like Conrad, Hoberman celebrates the centrality of Lydia Lunch of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks as a major punk performer featured in several of the films he analyzes. He comments on her talent as follows: "As *Rome '78*'s disheveled coquette, the bratty dominatrix of the B's *Black Box*, or the autistic child of Vivienne Dick's *Beauty Becomes the Beast*, this 20-year-old ex-groupie... has demonstrable range as well as presence." (17) In "Lydia Lunch, *The Right Side of My Brain,*" Chuck Kleinhans makes a compelling case for the centrality of Lunch as the super-8 star of punk, which he sees as a " moment—musical and lifestyle and filmic" when "the ripped and ragged, the torn, the distressed, the limited, the obviously flawed, brand an attitude." (101)

[Left] As Chuck Kleinhans argues, female punk performers such as Lydia Lunch draw on the "powers of horror" Julia Kristeva describes in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) in ways that open up new possibilities for women to express their sexuality on screen.





[Above] Lydia Lunch solidifies her punk screen stardom as the abject protagonist of Richard Kern's *Right Side of My Brain*.

Even though Richard Kern directed the short, Lunch's powerful screen presence shapes the film's "dark Romanticism" and, as Kleinhans argues, assures "its place as a major film presenting female abjection." (101) Like Patti Smith and other female punk performers, Lunch never shied away from dealing with objectionable, excessive, disturbing, grotesque, and taboo subjects, including sadomasochism, bondage, lesbian desire, interracial sexuality, childhood sexual abuse, the occult, torture, sexual humiliation, and self-loathing without an overtly "feminist" frame providing a specific way to read these images.



Punk aggressively enacts the dark side of society without providing explanations, analysis, or excuses, and that makes it an empowering, potent provocation for many of the women who embraced the subcultural style. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's analysis of abjection (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*), Kleinhans explores the way Lunch uses punk to shape her pain and transform it: "... in this case female embrace of abjection reveals itself as potentially and perhaps actually more profound, more powerful, more threatening." (Kleinhans 110). Without a doubt, women artists have worked with raw and violent themes throughout history; however, as Kleinhans' appraisal of Lunch shows, punk opened up "a potential energy in female abjection" (109) for young women to express intense disgust with the sexual status-quo.

Using the punk subculture as a conceptual frame sheds light on an interpretative

Lydia Lunch on the streets of Downtown New York in Vivienne Dick's *Beauty Becomes the Beast* (1979), with the politics of the place and time as part of Dick's implicit commentary on youth culture and urban life.

landscape that would remain occluded otherwise. Outside of the subcultural context, Lunch's performance loses much of its significance as an indictment of the ways in which gender norms straightjacketed young women, how traditional sexual mores stymied their search for pleasure, how sexual violence haunted their lives, how society treated them like trash, and how too many in the feminist movement dismissed them as victims of internalized misogyny. Punk permits Lunch to perform her abjection as more than a self-indulgent exhibition of personal fantasies of dominance and submission, and to voice a naked appeal to look at how society has trashed her generation in more ways than one. Starting out as a rock groupie runaway, Lunch's ability to move from fan to punk performer testifies to the porousness of the boundaries between stage and dance floor. In *Just Kids*, Smith highlights this by noting: "The thin line between the stage and the people and the faces of all those who supported us." (245) The raw punk DIY aesthetic allows Lunch to cross media with confidence, and her performances as a musician and spoken-word artist blend together with her screen appearances and decision to take up the camera herself later in her career.

Editor Joan Hawkins' own contributions to the anthology also involve women filmmakers—interviews with Beth B and Bette Gordon and a chapter devoted to Gordon's feature *Variety* (1984) that helped give New Queer Cinema independent producer Christine Vachon her start as well. Hawkins adeptly situates her reading of *Variety* within the context of the pornography/erotica debates and "sex wars" erupting in feminist circles at the time, in which questions of erotic pleasure and violent sexual danger polarized women in the movement. She expressly situates Gordon's film within a Downtown scene in which women (many identifying with punk and/or glitter/glam) infiltrated all-male domains, such as strip bars and porn cinemas, for their own ends:

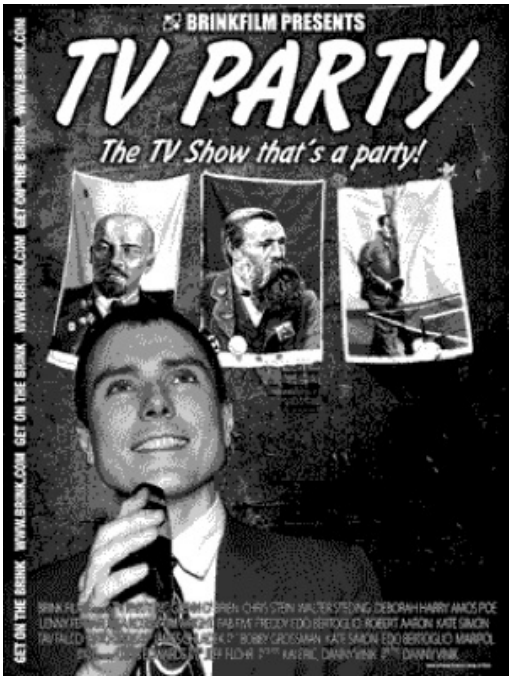


Working in the ticket booth at a Downtown New York porn theater in Bette Gordon's *Variety* (1984).

> "The early days of the Downtown movement encompass an era that is not usually discussed in feminist history. This is a pre-Third Wave period that overlapped Second Wave Feminism and took many of Second Wave Feminism's accomplishments for granted. But it also reacted against much of what has been seen as the constrictions of Second Wave Feminism. Downtown women dressed up, made up and revelled in the way that gender and sexuality could be performed. Many Downtown artists worked in the sex industry or danced in clubs to make money to do their art, and they resented what they saw as the prudishness and privilege of feminists like Andrea Dworkin. Later, the AIDS crisis galvanized the entire Downtown movement, and the women I'm writing about here joined forces with ACT UP in a manner that put sexuality and race (rather than just gender) front and centre in their identity formation." (124)

The preponderance of the other chapters included in *Downtown Film and TV Culture* pick up on this vitally important aspect of the subcultural melting pot of Lower Manhattan from the mid-1970s to early 1980s. As Hawkins acknowledges, younger women, representing an evolving postmodern post-feminism and queer sensibility, brought a dramatically different conception of gender and female sexuality to the New York scene. Laurie Stone's appraisal of Spalding Gray's performance pieces, for example, shows the way in which the male raconteur appropriates aspects of the confessional style of feminist artists as well as the explicit description of homoeroticism only possible after Stonewall. A roundtable discussion, "Downtown's Queer Asides," with Lucas Hilderbrand, Alexandra Juhasz, Debra Levine and Ricardo Montez, makes many of the inchoate LGBTQ political concerns of the other chapters more explicit as well.

The chapters on cable access by Terese Svoboda, Benjamin Olin, Nick Zedd and David Sjoberg show how programs such as *TV Party* brought punk, glitter, glam,



Glenn O'Brien brings Downtown Manhattan to Cable TV in *TV Party* (1978-1982).



Patti Smith cannot bear to witness the procedure, but agrees to provide the voice-over for Sandy Daley's *Robert Having His Nipple Pierced* (1971).

and their queer possibilities into subscribers' living rooms—albeit buried on obscure channels at odd hours. In fact, *Downtown Film and TV Culture*'s mission to rescue many of these ephemeral broadcasts, buried super-8 reels, and club performances from obscurity also adds significantly to the history of female artists, musicians, and filmmakers. The book concludes with Mark Benedetti's "semi-comprehensive filmography and videography of Downtown moving image production from the mid 1970s to the early 2000s" (335) with many distribution sources. The number of women on this list testifies to the contribution punk and other New York subcultures made at the time to enabling women to pick up the camera to tackle new subject matter in the company of other women who shared their vision, aesthetic, and subcultural sensibilities. In the wake of punk filmmakers such as Beth B, Ericka Beckman, Vivienne Dick, Pat Place, Tina L'Hotsky, and, of course, Lydia Lunch, other women gravitated to the cinema to explore similarly disturbing topics involving women's bodies, sexual taboos, and female abjection, including Sadie Benning, Bette Gordon, and Abigail Child, among others listed in Benedetti's filmography.

In *Just Kids*, Patti Smith does not write much about the filmmakers in her circle although she does mention some luminaries such as Jonas Mekas and Shirley Clarke, and she only makes desultory comments on the films in which she appears. For example, she does not mention *Blank Generation*, but Smith does discuss a film not included in Hawkins' book, Sandy Daley's *Robert Having His Nipple Pierced* (1971), which circulated in some touring programs devoted to punk film at the time. Acquainted with Andy Warhol and his circle as well as the residents of the Chelsea Hotel, Daley frequented Max's Kansas City with Mapplethorpe and Smith. In *Just Kids*, Smith talks about the production as follows:

> "Robert got his nipple pierced. He had it done by a doctor in Sandy Daley's space while he nestled in the arms of David Croland. She filmed it in 16mm, an unholy ritual, Robert's *Chant d'Amour*. I had faith that under Sandy's impeccable direction it would be beautifully shot. But I found the procedure repellent and did not attend, certain it would get infected, which it did. When I asked Robert what it was like, he said it was both interesting and creepy." (159)

Thus, Daley's film speaks to another meeting point between trans-Atlantic glam/glitter and punk. Mapplethorpe's lover, David Croland, had, as Smith points out in her book, collaborated with Donald Cammel, the co-director (with Roeg) of *Performance*. Moreover, Smith sees the film in relation to Genet's homoerotic short about prisoners and their jailor, *Song of Love* (1950), which Mekas had brought to New York. Writing earlier in the book about Mapplethorpe's evolving sexual identity and their romantic relationship, Smith admits:

> "I knew nothing of the reality of homosexuality. I thought it irrevocably meshed with affectation and flamboyance. I had prided myself on being nonjudgmental, but my comprehension was narrow and provincial. Even in reading Genet, I saw his men as a mystical race of thieves and sailors. I didn't fully comprehend their world. I embraced Genet as a poet." (77)

Smith's stream-of-consciousness voice over for *Robert Having His Nipple Pierced* speaks to her intimate involvement and alienation from New York's gay male subcultures and their rituals. Literally off-screen and excluded from this part of Mapplethorpe's life, she still witnesses the piercing through the eyes of another woman, Sandy Daley. Speaking about her trans brother, drawing on her own life and artistic influences in her monologue, Smith maintains her distance from the rites and rituals of the gay subcultures that Mapplethorpe embraced.

Smith also chronicles the making and exhibition of another cinematic collaboration with Mapplethorpe in her book. Emerging director Liza Rinzler served as the cinematographer for *Still Moving* (1978), designed as part of a gallery installation showcasing pieces by Smith and Mapplethorpe. A still photographer and director of cinematography for documentaries and feature films such as *Menace II Society* (1993), Rinzler, like Daley, provides a female point of view that mediates Mapplethorpe and Smith's creative encounter. In the finished piece, Mapplethorpe intercuts his still photographs of Smith with Rinzler's motion pictures and Smith's voice over on the themes of artistic inspiration, occult mysticism, and the responsibility of the artist to speak to society. Smith talks about the success of the collaboration with Mapplethorpe in *Just Kids* as follows:

> "He decided to call the film *Still Moving*, as he incorporated the stills in the final edit of the film, and we built a sound track with my commentary mixed with me playing electric guitar and excerpts from "Gloria." In doing so, he represented the many facets of our work—photography, poetry, improvisation, and performance... *Still Moving* reflected his view of the future of visual expression and music, a type of music video that could stand on its own as art." (257)

This marked the first and last time Smith collaborated on a gallery show with Mapplethorpe; however, it testifies to several crucial aspects of the meeting of fine art and punk, gay men and straight women, music videos and gallery installations within the fecund creative environment of New York City in the 1970s. Downtown Manhattan provided a place where diverse subcultures, avant-garde photographers and rock musicians, several generations of underground artists and poets, as well as young activists involved in feminist and LGBTQ movements could congregate and overturn many of the rules that governed both the world of fine art and commercial popular culture. Mapplethorpe and Smith played a crucial part in these sex and gender "culture wars" that extended far beyond the borders of Lower Manhattan.



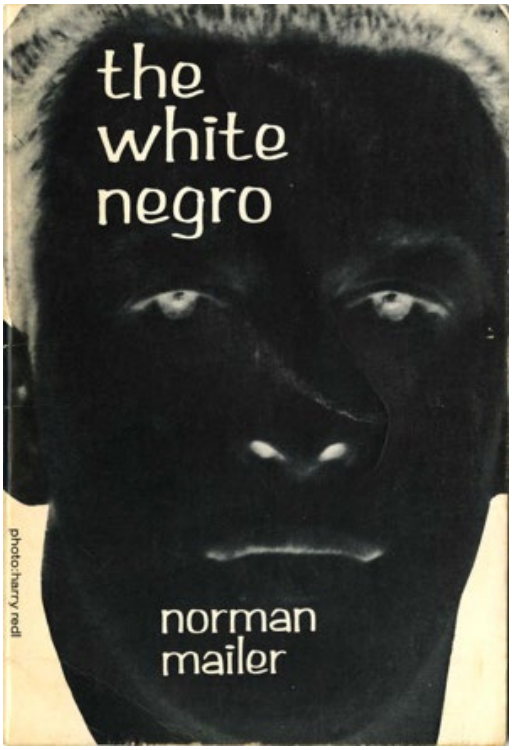
Patti Smith in *Still Moving* (1978)—her only film/installation/photographic collaboration with Robert Mapplethorpe.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

On race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism



Norman Mailer talks about an earlier generation of hipsters in his 1957 essay, "The White Negro," but many of his observations ring true for the punk, glitter, and glam subcultures in the 1970s and 1980s.

Downtown, however, did not provide unlimited possibilities for all. In Hawkins' anthology, contributor Lynne Tillman astutely observes, "Downtown was overwhelmingly white, though living inside a city that was not." (32) Uptown Harlem seemed worlds away, and African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians primarily appear as marginal figures or sources of inspiration in all four books. New York novelist and co-founder of the *Village Voice*, Norman Mailer wrote "The White Negro" in 1957, and some of his observations hold true for Downtown Manhattan twenty years later. Mailer interprets the 1950s beat scene as follows:

> "In such places as Greenwich Village. a menage-a-trois was completed —the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the Negro, and the hipster was a fact in American life... The hipster had absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro, and for practical purposes could be considered a white Negro."
>
> "... they [hipsters] are an elite with the potential ruthlessness of an elite, and a language most adolescents can understand instinctively for the hipster's intense view of existence matches their experience and their desire to rebel."

When Patti Smith sings "Rock and Roll Nigger" with the lyrics "Baby was a black sheep, baby was a whore," she channels Mailer's Hip appropriation of African American argot in the service of her own rebellion against the Man. However, although she reflects on her meeting with Jimi Hendrix, who broke the color-line for rock guitarists, Smith does not consider the role race plays in the class, gender and sexual dynamics of Downtown culture at all in *Just Kids*. Mapplethorpe's controversial photographs of nude black men[9] as well as the ways in which punk drew a line between Hip Hop, rap, and disco are not covered in her autobiographical account.

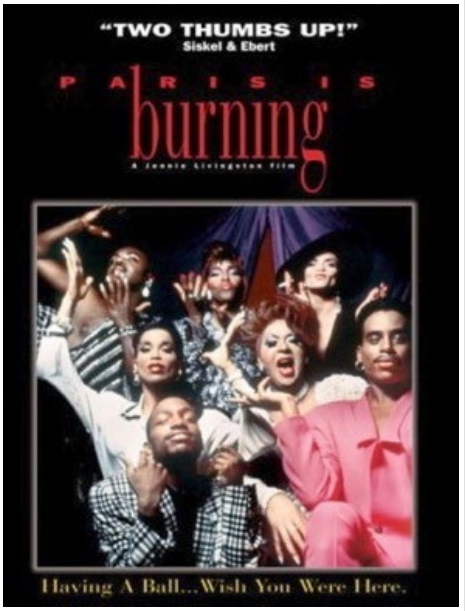
Madonna provides another example of a white performer, emerging out of this New York subcultural mix, around this time, who appropriates minority imagery. Drawing on punk, porn, disco, Catholicism, Hollywood movies, and African American and Hispanic gay subcultures, Madonna crafts an image situated somewhere between Debbie Harry's Blondie and Patti Smith's Black Sheep Whore. Susan Seidelman's low-budget feature *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) immerses Madonna in the street culture of New York City and helped to popularize the star's distinctive style. In fact, *Desperately Seeking Susan* builds on the director's earlier feature, *Smithereens* (1982),[10] [open notes in new window] featuring Richard Hell, Amos Poe, and others associated with punk/New Wave/No Wave film, performance, and music. Glitter, glam, and punk helped to shape Madonna's stage persona. It is difficult, for instance, to imagine[10] Madonna in her leather bustier without Lydia Lunch's provocative punk appropriations of the accoutrements associated with pornography and sexual subcultures involving dominance and submission.

Camille Paglia writes about Madonna as a "real feminist" in the *New York Times* (Camille, "Madonna—Finally, a Real Feminist."); however, Paglia fails to link Bowie's gender transgressions with Madonna's sexual adventurousness in her

contribution to *David Bowie Is*, even though the two stars have much in common in their ambivalent relationship to racial politics and whiteness. For example, bell hooks criticizes Madonna in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, and some of that critique could be extended to Patti Smith as well.



Rosanna Arquette and Madonna reanimate punk for a wider female viewership in Susan Seidelman's indie feature *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985).



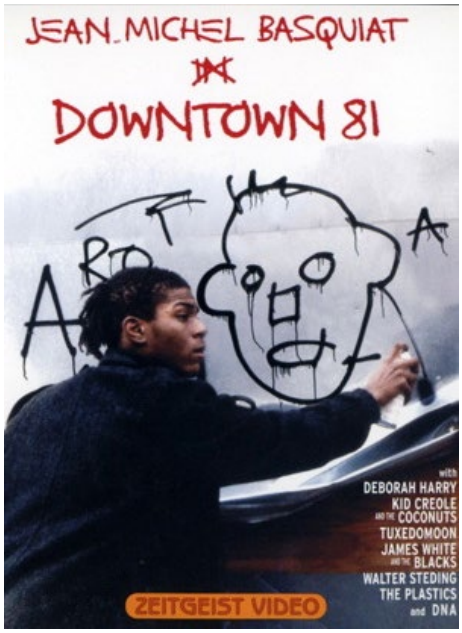
Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) goes Uptown for a glimpse of queer subcultural expressions beyond Greenwich Village.

Although further Uptown, the world of the African American and Hispanic drag queens in Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1990) does not appear in *Downtown Film and TV Culture*, even though some mention of the documentary could provide a fuller subcultural context for the Downtown films included. Made by a white, woman as an outsider, *Paris is Burning* not only chronicles elaborate drag competitions, but explores the violence experienced by poor, minority, transsexuals in New York. The film also speaks to a moment in New York film history when women took up the camera to look broadly at sexual minority subcultures and their considerable creative expressions from punk to drag across gender, class, and racial borders.

Afro-Caribbean American graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat[11] also connects the David Bowie books with *Downtown Film and TV Culture*. As Benjamin Olin points out in his chapter in the Hawkins' anthology, Basquiat appeared as a regular on the cable-access television show, *TV Party*, hosted by Glenn O'Brien, who also wrote for Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. In her chapter, "The Downtown Scene in the Digital Era," Laurel Westrup examines Basquiat as a central figure in *Downtown 81* (2000), written by O'Brien, as well as in *TV Party*. Westrup contrasts Basquiat's collaborations with O'Brien with the feature film *Basquiat* (1996), directed by fellow Neo-Expressionist painter Julian Schnabel, who had worked at Max's Kansas City before being recognized as an artist. Schnabel collaborated with Thomas Holman on the script.[12] Holman also knew Basquiat personally, forming the New Wave band Gray together after Holman stopped touring as a dancer with the glam group The Tubes, known for songs such as "White Punks on Dope." David Bowie plays Andy Warhol in Schnabel's film, [13] making the connection to glam as well as Pop Art and the Factory clear. As Westrup shows, O'Brien and Schnabel had very different views of Basquiat. She argues:

> "The discrepancy between Schnabel's vision of Basquiat and O'Brien's in the *Downtown 81* DVD operates metonymically—that is, the competing narratives of Basquiat represent competing narratives of the Downtown scene as a whole... a tension between different definitions of the Downtown avant-garde's aesthetic ethos, some of which privilege individual artists who work in a single medium, and some of which privilege collaboration and intermedial experimentation." (294-5)

That this bickering involves white interlocutors of African American/Hispanic musical, literary and artistic expression over authority to depict the "authentic" Basquiat exposes some of the racial politics in play in Lower Manhattan.



One vision of Jean-Michel Basquiat in Glenn O'Brien's *Downtown 81* (2000).



A competing depiction of Basquiat in Julian Schnabel's *Basquiat* (1996), featuring David Bowie as Andy Warhol.

In New York City, Downtown also includes Chinatown, and, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, several media institutions serving the Asian American community called Lower Manhattan home, including Downtown Community Television Center (DCTV co-founded by Keiko Tsuno and Jon Alpert) and Asian CineVision, which hosted the annual Asian American International Film Festival, located on the Bowery for several years. *Downtown Film and TV Culture* does include a chapter by Jack Sargeant on Jon Moritsugu's *Mommy Mommy Where's My Brain* (1986), which he positions as part of the Cinema of Transgression. Sargeant, however, does not discuss Moritsugu's impact on Asian American film at the time. Born in Honolulu, Moritsugu, who attended Brown University in Rhode Island, does have East Coast connections and did make some of his films in New York, e.g., *L'il Debbie Snackwhore of New York City* (1987). Moritsugu's punk films such as *Der Elvis* (1987), which served as his thesis film at Brown, created considerable argument when they screened at Asian American film festivals. Not only did he court controversy because of his raw aesthetic, irreverent scatological humor, and provocative Nazi references reminiscent of British punk rocker Sid Vicious' infamous swastika jockstrap, but Moritsugu, collaborating with Amy Davis, very often did not feature Asian faces or narratives dealing with his Japanese American ethnic heritage. As a consequence, some programming committees questioned whether they should be considered "Asian American" at all; however, as a punk films, they attracted considerable attention Downtown in



Punk and Asian American film overlap in the

oeuvre of Jon Moritsugu. *Mommy Mommy Where's My Brain* (1986) provides one example of his commitment to punk and trash aesthetics.



Moritsugu's *Terminal U.S.A.* (1993) takes punk and the Asian American model minority in directions unanticipated by his Public Broadcasting (PBS) sponsors.



Shu Lea Cheang's *Fresh Kill* (1996) takes full advantage of Downtown Manhattan's multiethnic LGBTQ bohemian mix.

other circles.

James Schamus, co-founded the independent production house Good Machine with Ted Hope, produced Moritsugu's *Terminal USA* (1993), the same year Schamus produced and co-wrote *The Wedding Banquet* with Ang Lee. In *Terminal USA*, Moritsugu takes on a dual lead as twin brothers—one a closeted homosexual uncommunicative computer nerd, and the other a sex and drug-crazed punk rocker—in a dysfunctional Asian American family. Schamus also produced Todd Haynes' *Poison* (1991), the New Queer Cinema classic examined in Chris Dumas' chapter in Hawkins' anthology. In fact, Schamus figures prominently in Downtown media arts as bringing together New Queer Cinema, Asian American independent features, and punk/No Wave aesthetics. For instance, also in 1993, Schamus produced *Totally F***Ed Up ("Another Homo Movie By Gregg Araki")*. Like Moritsugu, Araki troubled the usual definitions of Asian American filmmaking at the time by producing raw work about urban alienation, teenage angst, gay youth, and AIDS. Araki is a California filmmaker; however, Downtown brought him into New York's bohemian circles through his screenings at the Asian American International Film Festival. More attention to the role played by Asian Americans in Downtown media arts would also spotlight some key independent filmmakers such as Shu Lea Cheang (*Fresh Kill*, 1996)[14] and Evans Chan (*Bauhinia*, 2002),[15] who set much of their work in Lower Manhattan.



Fresh Kill's Erin McMurtry and Sarita Choudhury with a reference to Downtown Community Television in the background.

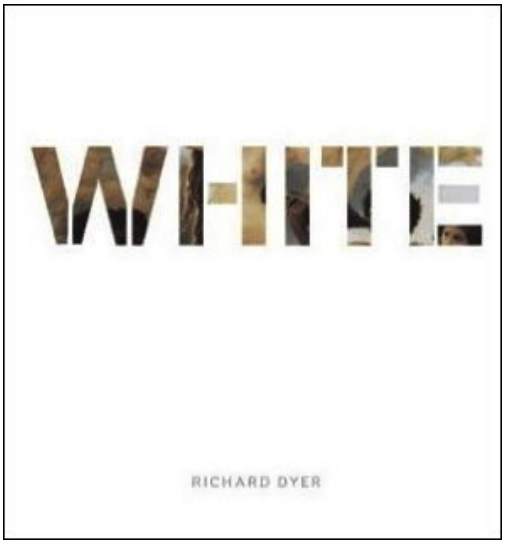


Evans Chan's *Bauhinia* (2002) tells the story of a young female filmmaker from Hong Kong struggling near Ground Zero in the aftermath of 9/11 in Lower Manhattan.

Glam also has complicated racial politics. As the creation of an alter-ego called the "Thin White Duke" might imply, David Bowie had a self-conscious understanding of his white skin and its relationship to race, class, colonialism and the decay of the British Empire. However, although Bowie saw himself as performing a part, his flirtations with Nazi imagery caused considerable controversy. Moreover, Bowie took the African American roots of rock music for granted as David Baker points out in his analysis of Bowie's covers in *Enchanting David Bowie*, and an ambivalent relationship to American culture more generally as Amedeo D'Adamo points out in his contribution to the book on the song "Young Americans."

Sean Redmond's chapter in *Enchanting David Bowie*, "The Whiteness of David Bowie," addresses his "hyper" whiteness in relation to the upper-class masculinity of the aristocratic dandy as well as the otherworldly whiteness of what Redmond sees as part of Bowie's "alien androgyny and an unstable sexuality" (215). Redmond concentrates on the year 1983 for his analysis of Bowie's whiteness, which he explains as follows:

> "The year 1983 registers as that in which whiteness is acutely imagined to be under threat from the 'Asian tiger' and transforming geopolitical realities, its own languid anti-corporeality, the AIDS 'epidemic' and



Inspired by Richard Dyer's book, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, Sean Redmond argues that race is a factor in the construction of Bowie's star image.



Ryuichi Sakamoto channeling Yukio Mishima and Sessue Hayakawa in Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1983) as an Asian foil to David Bowie's "whiteness."



The queer embrace dooms both characters.

> the rise of racism in Europe and elsewhere—realities which require it to reposition its power relations with the sexual and ethnic Other." (215)
>
> "The desire for the Other, for the 'strange' in 1983, radiated out from a cultural centre that was white, and stemmed from a 'white' need that was about both owning the exotic Other, and devouring or ingesting them." (228)

Drawing on Richard Dyer's book, *White: Essays on Race and Culture*, Redmond argues that Bowie's appearance as a vampire in Tony Scott's *The Hunger*, as well as his portrayal of an officer in a Japanese prison-of-war camp in Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, speak to similar issues of whiteness as Bowie's 1983 stage persona. With an eye on the increasing visibility of Japanese consumer goods such as automobiles and electronics as well as popular culture such as manga and anime, Tony's brother, Ridley, made *Blade Runner* (1982), a science fiction/film noir hybrid set in a techno-Oriental future Los Angeles in which people speak an argot sprinkled with Japanese. Therefore, Bowie's whiteness drew on the historical past as well as pointing to a dystopian future.

While *The Hunger* references consumerism, disease, and the fragility of white masculinity in the wake of feminism's empowered women, *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*[16] draws on Christian messianic symbols of sacrifice, resurrection, moral and spiritual superiority, and serves as "a vehicle for a postcolonial global exchange where what takes place is the reinforcement of racial difference, and the re-centring of white culture in a master/slave relationship with the Other." (224) Redmond points to Bowie's appropriation of Japanese clothing designs by Kansai Yamamoto to reinforce the star's "commodification of the Orient that takes place in a global marketplace." (225) As Camille Paglia points out in *David Bowie Is*, the star's Orientalist incorporation of Japanese costuming can be traced to his fascination with the female impersonators (onnagata) found in the all-male Kabuki theater. Bowie played Nihon Budokan Hall in Tokyo in 1978, and, arguably, the star had his eye on the increasing importance of his Asian fans to his career when he decided to work with Japanese New Wave director Nagisa Oshima and Ryuichi Sakamoto, a musician associated with techno-pop similar to electronic compositions by Brian Eno and other Bowie collaborators, on *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*.

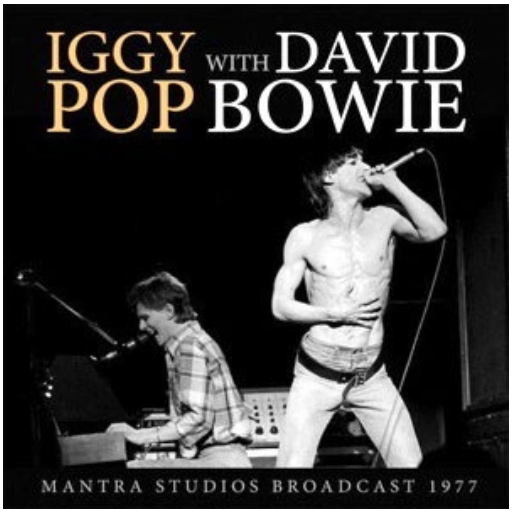
In the bilingual coproduction, Oshima draws on the popular appeal of music stars from Asia and the West, both in their own way "exotic" larger-than-life personalities, in a sharp critique of traditional masculinity, imperialism, and militarism. Sakamoto's character, Yanoi, resembles Yukio Mishima, a postwar Japanese author of homoerotic fiction known for his adherence to the military code of bushido, his failed coup attempt of 1970, and seppuku ritual suicide, as well as nodding to Japanese screen villains such as Sessue Hayakawa's prison commander in David Lean's *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1958). Lean also directed *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), and Oshima seems to be responding to Lean's blockbuster epics by making the homoeroticism at the heart of Lean's films explicit in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*.[17]Resembling Peter O'Toole as Lawrence of Arabia in many respects, Bowie's character, Celliers, tacitly



Bowie's frail, white, sunburnt face mocks the macho imperialism of Japan's rising red sun ablaze on a white field found on its flag. Director Oshima takes full advantage of his star Bowie's whiteness and queer connections in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*.



Director Oshima takes full advantage of his star Bowie's whiteness and queer connections in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*. Yanoi takes a lock of Celliers' hair as a memento of his homoerotic obsession with his captive.



Iggy Pop and David Bowie's collaboration on "China Girl" dates back to 1977; however, Bowie produced a fresh version of the song in 1983 with an accompanying video.

recognizes Yanoi's homosexual attraction and plays on the Japanese commander's desire in a calculating fashion culminating in a queer kiss that leads to the end of Yanoi's command and Celliers' execution. Oshima's critical examination of imperial masculinity in relation to torture, masochism, and repressed homosexuality uses Bowie's whiteness in a way that complicates Redmond's interpretation. When Celliers' red sunburned head protrudes from the sand like the sun at the heart of the Japanese flag, Yanoi cuts a lock of his ash-blond hair. The enemy's body at the heart of Japanese nationalism ironically serves as Yanoi's deepest taboo sexual desire. Arguably, Oshima queers Japanese militarism for reasons that go beyond Bowie's appropriation of Japanese style for global consumerism and speak more deeply to the auteur's sustained critique of global capitalism, militarism, sexual repression and Japanese society.

While courting an Asian woman, Iggy Pop collaborated with David Bowie on the song "China Girl," which Bowie rerecorded for the 1983 release of *Let's Dance*. Redmond points out that in the video that accompanies the song, "... the love of the exotic Orient is played out through sexual desire, drug addiction and a cryptic critique of hyper-whiteness in terms of its historical imperialism." (227) The interracial romance in the song in some ways parallels the relationship between Celliers and Yanoi in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*. Bowie supposedly understood the song/video as a critique of racism, and it does seem to equate white male imperialism with "visions of swastikas in my head" and the cultural industries that support it—"I'll give you television; I'll give you eyes of blue; I'll give you a man who wants to rule the world." However, feeling like "Marlon Brando," who plays a very ambivalent character in the Hollywood interracial romance, *Sayonara* (1957),[18] his relationship to the "little China Girl" may not be an unequivocal celebration Hollywood's white saviors of oppressed Asian women. Images of an Asian woman brandishing the red flag of China and confronting Bowie from behind barbed wire compete with Orientalist fashions inspired by Chinese opera. When the Asian woman described in the song says, "Oh baby, just you shut your mouth," she may mean just mean it—shushing his condescending sexism and racism while putting a hold on his imperial ambitions in the bedroom.[19]



In this segment of the music video for "China Girl" with Geeling Ng, Bowie seems more like William Holden in the classic beach scene with Jennifer Jones in *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* (1955) than Marlon Brando in *Sayonara* (1957).



Bowie's cross-cultural kiss with Ng dressed to resemble a Chinese opera beauty remains ambivalent, and it seems impossible to untangle the Orientalism of the images from the video's ostensible critique of imperialism.



The music video for “China Girl” with Geeling Ng allegorically references Asians' subjugation by Western military and political figures. Dressed as the soldiers and bankers of British imperialism ...



... they hold “China” embodied by the Asian woman as captive. The red flag points to the potential power of Asia to resist.

Redmond concludes that Bowie’s androgynous sexual otherness puts him in a position to transcend any implicit racism, fascism, and imperialist posturing: “Bowie is not only able to deal with the double binds of whiteness, but the politics of the difference of the Other.” (229) However, whether he succeeds at this consistently remains moot. Neither book examines Bowie’s marriage to African model Iman, which lasted for twenty-four years, and the challenges they faced as an intercultural celebrity couple. Iman did, however, comment on their marriage shortly before Bowie’s death: “We both understand the difference between the person and the persona...When we are home, we are just Iman and David. We’re not anybody else.”[20]



Bringing together two very different worlds of fashion and celebrity, Africa and England, Bowie and Iman remind me of John Lennon and Yoko Ono—highly public, creative, glamorous, unconventional, and very tender.

Mortality and memorials

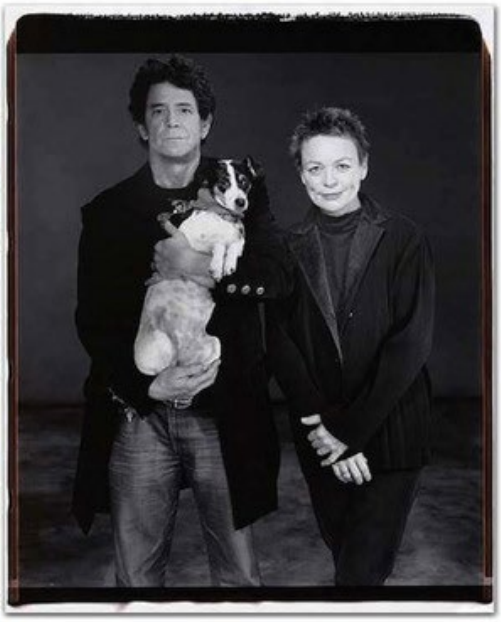
Punk, glitter, and glam were among the last spectacular youth subcultures to emerge before the digital age. Printed fanzines, posters, super-8 and home videos of performances and club events, garage band cassettes and vinyl records, and tapes of cable access broadcasts circulate on the Internet and as newly released DVDs. However, as “Part III: Memorials” of *Downtown Film and TV Culture* makes clear, there has been considerable loss of this ephemera. As a result, there is a feeling expressed by archivists Richard Toon and Laurie Stone as, “You had to be there.” *Just Kids*, of course, serves as a book-length eulogy for Robert Mapplethorpe, and Jean-Michel Basquiat haunts the Downtown scene in Hawkins’ anthology as well, dying of an overdose a few months before Mapplethorpe succumbed to AIDS. Other Downtown casualties receive no mention, however. British punk rocker Sid Vicious stabbed his lover Nancy Spungen at the Chelsea Hotel in 1978. Out on bail, awaiting trial for her murder, Vicious attacked Patti Smith’s brother, Todd Smith, who nearly lost his eye as a result. (Lim, Gerrie. “Patti Smith: The Power and the Glory, the Resurrection and the Life.”) Although Smith does talk about the death of Todd, who passed away around the same time as her husband, Fred “Sonic” Smith, Sid and Nancy, who lived in her old haunt, the Chelsea Hotel, stay out of the book. Memoirs need to be selective, and some of the darker side of punk buried.



Alex Cox’s feature film, *Sid and Nancy* (1986), about the lives and deaths of Sid Vicious (Gary Oldman) and Nancy Spungen (Chloe Webb) walks the thin line between glamorizing their tempestuous relationship and showing the toll that heroin can take on addicts as well as the

Many other subcultural celebrities who appear in these four books have passed away over the years as well. All of these enormously talented artists, composers, writers and performers lived and/or worked within a few square blocks in Manhattan. They knew each other worked together, argued, fought, and contributed creatively to the world beyond Lower Manhattan. If nothing else, reading these four books made me realize how important urban spatial proximity, temporal concurrence, and what Pierre Bourdieu might call “social capital”[21] are to cultural formations and subcultural transgressions. Subcultural street styles

destructive power of the media within rock circles.



Laurie Anderson memorializes her dog, Lolabelle, in *Heart of a Dog* (2015); however, her meditation on loss extends to the mourning of her husband Lou Reed, who passed away in 2013. Reed does not appear in the film, but his presence is felt in the way Anderson talks about their pet.

feed fashion, art, music, and literature. The life and death of the people involved mark the passage of time, and, for Hawkins, the end of an era with the collapse of the Twin Towers in 2001. Lou Reed died in 2013 from liver failure, and his wife musician/performance artist Laurie Anderson pays tribute to his memory by ruminating on mortality through a stream-of-consciousness commentary on 9/11 juxtaposed with the life and death of her pet Lolabelle in *Heart of a Dog* (2015). Reed's absence is strongly felt, and the fact he is not there provides a particularly moving tribute to his memory and the pain Anderson must still experience because of her loss.

David Bowie Is contains a photograph of his "life mask," which, of course, looks like a death mask for Ziggy Stardust. Many of the chapters in *Enchanting David Bowie* deal with themes of death, resurrection, and the afterlife. As Michael Mooradian Lupro notes in the first chapter, Bowie's first major breakthrough song, "Space Oddity" (1969), not only parodies Kubrick's 2001 *A Space Odyssey* (1968) and comments on the 1969 moon landing, but also deals with death, human vulnerability, and rebellion. Bowie released "Lazarus" shortly before his death, and the song and accompanying music video provide a fitting end to themes that haunted his music his entire career. In his chapter on *Velvet Goldmine*, D'Cruz, drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of "hauntology," talks about the cinema's "flickering vacillation between presence and absence that enabled the dead to return." (264) In *David Bowie Is*, Geoffrey Marsh mentions an early experimental short *The Image* (1969), directed by Michael Armstrong, which seems to obliquely allude to the homoerotic and decadent imagery in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Bowie plays a ghostlike male beauty in a psychodrama in which Bowie's character appears to entice, seduce, and obsess a painter who reacts violently to the young man's "image." Even after the painter appears to kill his nemesis, the reanimated subject of his obsession returns to haunt him. In "Lazarus," Bowie, on his deathbed, revisits this funereal relationship between the image and his own mortality, between his rebellion against death and its inevitability.

Just Kids, *Downtown Film and TV Culture*, *Enchanting David Bowie*, and *David Bowie Is* all pay tribute to the gender rebels of the 1970s and 1980s, giving punk, glitter and glam an afterlife as fitting tributes to their rage against sexual conformity. I highly recommend all four books for anyone interested in engaging with the popular culture, subcultures and experimental media arts of those times more deeply. Punk, glitter and glam represent the last major youth subcultures of the Baby Boom, and, as such, they offer insight into the enormous cultural shifts to follow. They solidified the gains of their generation while also exposing the darker side of the conservative forces that continued to plague gender outlaws, sexual nonconformists, rebel artists, political radicals and avant-garde activists. Gentrification has swallowed Downtown Manhattan and London's Soho district. Youth subcultures have become more nomadic with online contact replacing much of the intensity of Greenwich Village or swinging London. However, punk, glitter and glam still serve as a model for how youth subcultures operate. Even without urgent battles over physical space, those marginalized by gender, sexual orientation, race, class, or age still struggle for a cultural space for artistic expression and the development of a style unfettered by the demands of the mainstream. From this perspective, reading *Just Kids*, *Downtown Film and TV Culture*, *Enchanting David Bowie*, and *David Bowie Is* offers more than just an exercise in nostalgia for an aging generation. Reflecting on the relationship between youth subcultures, art, fashion, technology, and the marketplace offers insight into the continuing importance of struggling for subcultural expression and recognition in often hostile environments. David Bowie, Patti Smith, and their peers may no longer be "just kids," but the struggles they represent haunt us into the twenty-first century.



David Bowie reanimated in the music video *Lazarus* (2015), a fitting summation of a career in which themes of death and resurrection played such an important role.



David Bowie's first film role in *The Image* (1969), directed by Michael Armstrong, hauntingly parallels his final performance in *Lazarus*.

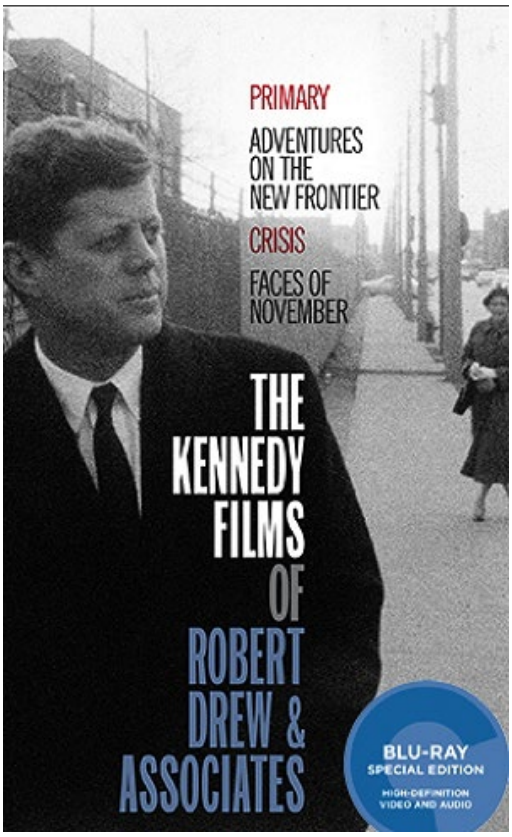
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Robert Drew, former Life correspondent, was determined to change documentary from routine coverage to a new style that Drew Associates called "Direct Cinema" to distinguish it from Jean Rouch's cinema verite developed the same year (1960). On his team, Drew included nonfiction filmmakers Richard Leacock, D. A. Pennebaker, and Albert Maysles. These men dramatically changed the future of documentary and their first film, *Primary*, became a landmark. The group had direct access to John F. Kennedy, filming him on the campaign trail for the Wisconsin primary against Hubert Humphrey. All these filmmakers went on as both a group and as individuals to make remarkable films in their "fly on the wall" style.

Are personal documentaries also ethnographic films?

review by Sharon R. Sherman

> Scott MacDonald, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 415 pages.

How might one conceptualize ethnographic documentaries and personal documentaries in the same genre? In his book, *American Ethnographic Film and Personal Documentary: The Cambridge Turn*, author Scott MacDonald provides a viewpoint and examples that demonstrate just how personal ethnographic films become for those who make them. How were these filmmakers affected from being in the field and how did ethnographers recognize that they were documenting themselves at the same time they were documenting "Others?"

Supposedly focusing on "primitive" or "pre-industrial" cultures, early ethnographic filmmakers went outside their own borders to bring us a window into a world relatively hidden from modernization, a world they believed was in a process of transition. "Get it quickly, before it's gone" was the underlying premise. Margaret Mead fueled the idea that learning about other cultures, documenting them before they disappeared, was a worthy and urgent task that would teach us to learn more about ourselves and the human condition. MacDonald echoes that sentiment:

> "Going to a new and different environment tells us as much about our 'normal' environment as about the new and different place, and exploring our personal lives can be a way of discovering the complexity and strangeness of our own lives and culture."

MacDonald begins the first section of his book addressing the films of three well-known ethnographic documentarians who conducted what became "salvage ethnography" and acquired filmic notoriety in the process. These influential filmmakers are John Marshall, Robert Gardner and Tim Asch. Their overlapping careers extended from the 1950s to the 2000s (Asch died in 1994). They worked on each other's films (sometimes for sound, other times for editing) and were part of a close-knit circle whose most active work occurred during the 1960s and '70s. Almost all of the filmmakers MacDonald discusses have worked in Cambridge, Massachusetts, either at MIT's Film Section or Harvard's Film Study Center (and its Sensory Ethnography Lab).

MacDonald also mentions other filmmakers if the connection to Cambridge exists. For example, two other well-known Cambridge film teams who receive some recognition are Frederik Wiseman, famed for his documentation of institutions and his use of observational cinema; and the Drew Associates, a group initially put together by Drew to document the Democratic party's Wisconsin



Drew Associates changed documentary syle by shooting unscripted actions with a small crew and allowing people to tell their own stories. Direct cinema gave audiences a sense of "truth." Drew Associates also made following politicians and going behind the scenes commonplace.



As a member of Drew Associates, Richard Leacock (1921-2011) became influential in documenting his times, and, later, as a mentor to many of the personal documentarians and students at MIT. Known for numerous films, his capture of Janis Joplin for *Monteray Pop* caught Joplin at an energetic peak and remains one of the best documents of her art.



During the Vietnam War, Frederick Wiseman

campaign between Hubert Humphrey and John F. Kennedy for President of the United States for the ground-breaking verité film *Primary* (1960).

Historically, these filmmakers cannot be ignored because of their significance in the development of cinema verité, direct cinema, or observational cinema (all terms dependent upon the viewer, theorist, or filmmaker). MacDonald uses the term "observational cinema," following that chosen by Bill Nichols. One could argue about these terms, insisting that cinema verité refers to the filmic style of Jean Rouch, direct cinema to North American films, and observational cinema to a term used most often by Colin Young at UCLA; but MacDonald makes it clear that these differences are minimal and semantic. The irony is that many of the first ethnographic films do not fall into any verité category.

For MacDonald, the films of those in Cambridge, prior to the personal documentary, do not merit the in-depth analysis and description he gives to the films of those who documented non-Western cultures. Such films are often not *verité* in any way. For example, *Dead Birds* (1963) by Robert Gardner is not in sync sound, one of the hallmarks of the new cinema style, but it is certainly ethnographic. In addition, U.S. projects coming out of Los Angeles from UCLA's ethnographic film program or USC's Center for Visual Anthropology are also rarely part of MacDonald's story. For example, Tim Asch conducted work in Cambridge and then from 1983 to 1994 went on to teach numerous students who worked with him at USC. Of course, all of these developments occurred later. The creation of the Film Study Center at Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology was established early in academia, in 1958. Thus MacDonald's focus seems quite appropriate. Today, programs in Visual Anthropology exist in institutions from Temple University to New York University to San Diego State, among many others in the U.S., and also internationally in such locations as Australia, Berlin, Peru, Barcelona and the University of British Columbia.

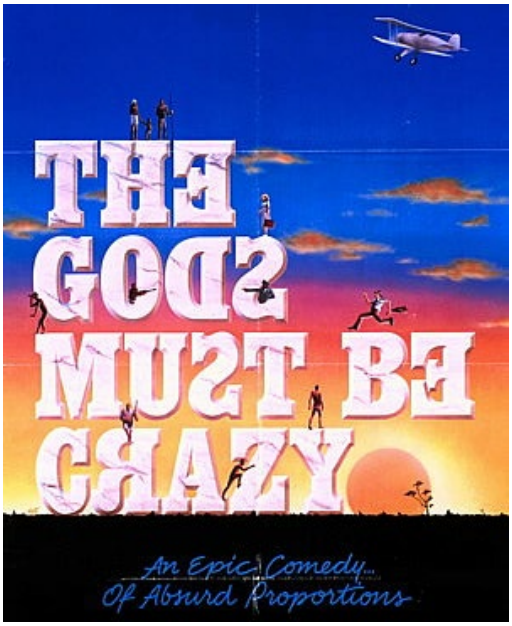
Because this book concentrates on Cambridge filmmakers, MacDonald begins his tale with that of John Marshall, rather than the usual device of documentary film historians opening with Flaherty. Marshall and his family went to the Kalahari Desert on numerous expeditions, most of which were sponsored by the Peabody Museum of Harvard University**,** and the Smithsonian. Family members documented aspects of San, aka !Kung Bushmen, aka Ju/'hoansi life in various forms. John's mother, Lorna, created *First Film* (1951), edited by John; and both Lorna and Elizabeth, John's sister, wrote ethnographies. Their overall objective was to document one of the last remaining groups of hunter-gather societies. One of their underlying premises, unstated, is that of cultural evolution. To discover what one's own society was like in an earlier age, study other people living a more primitive life (Tylor, 1871). What might we learn from societies considered to be living our past in the present? Once in such cultures, anthropologists quickly discarded this notion, recognizing that people are more similar than different and each society is unique unto itself. Nevertheless, in her film Lorna explains that the people of the Kalahari are living a Stone Age existence.

The films produced by the Marshalls, especially those created by John, are now famous examples of the documentation of one culture in depth. The most notable of these films is *The Hunters* (1957). Four hunters embark upon a two-week

turned his camera on Northeast High School in Philadelphia. *High School* played out the individual versus the authorities via the generation gap. Wiseman's look at Institutions has covered topics as varied as *Titicut Follies* (a horrific look at an asylum for the criminally insane), *Store* (about Neiman Marcus), and *Welfare*. He is now making his fortieth film.



John Marshall lived with the San for much of his life and completed 23 edited films of an ever-evolving society. See "A Million Feet of Film/A Lifetime of Friendship: The John Marshall Ju/'hoan Bushman Film and Video Collection http://anthropology.si.edu/johnmarshall



Director Jamie Ulys created *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a comedy that juxtaposed contemporary fast-paced society with the hunter-gatherer society of the San. A coke bottle falls from the sky from a passing plane and sets the events in motion. The San were told to "act" like

journey to kill a giraffe for food. Seen as ethnographic "truth," the story unfolds in the editing room. The footage was shot on several forays and edited to appear as one hunt. Robert Gardner, who assisted with editing, said he wanted to select "the major emphasis and outline for any culture" in his films, especially, in this society of "men as hunters" (1957:351). The romanticized notion of people who had to hunt to survive was not actually true since the !Kung had become gatherers. The film's representation of hunting as an activity is accurate, although its emphasis on hunting as subsistence is not. Karl Heider declared, "although the film is ethnographically faulty of the role of hunting in Bushmen life, its portrayal of the hunting itself remains unimpeached" (1976:32). Thus the narration and editing display a distortion of representing a "disappearing culture."

Unlike MacDonald, I find the narration irritating. MacDonald explains that Marshall is initially following the "voice of G-d" narrators of his time period, but then transforms into evocative description:

> "Once he has provided some context for what will become his focus on the hunters—the distinction between women's gathering work and men's hunting, the process through which boys become hunters, the poison that allows the !Kung arrows to kill large animals—the nature of Marshall's narration turns increasingly literary and evocative not merely of earlier films and *Nanook* but of epic literature." (25)

The narration is sometimes "mythic" for MacDonald. Other viewers have a different impression. Because the film was shot without sync sound, it relies on a narration that overemphasizes the obvious. Thus statements such as "they ate and ate and ate" spoken over visuals of the men eating insult the viewers' intelligence (Sherman 1998:37).

That John Marshall's films are significant is unquestionable. Marshall's own sense of *The Hunters* as "artistic" (an approach which Marshall's father did not like) led him to revisit the large quantity of footage he had originally shot. In his films that followed, he presented close-ups of interactions and, along with Tim Asch, created "sequence filming." One overarching theme, such as hunting, could not be emblematic of an entire culture. Small sequences allow us to see the people as individuals and learn how they cope with life's complexities. The films become windows into aspects of people's lives rather than displays of so-called "primitive" or "exotic" people. MacDonald handles this saga well, describing other films and TV shows about the people of the Kalahari, as well as Marshall's production of eleven films with the Pittsburgh police department and his role as the cameraman for Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967), a portrayal of the horrific conditions at the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane in Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

Those familiar with Marshall's films may not have read Marshall's written materials or interviews. MacDonald presents the backstory of the Marshalls' awareness of the impact they had on the society they studied. Constructing roads to get into the San area, the Marshalls inadvertently led others to find and eventually destroy a way of life. The Bushmen become known by their representation in the fictional feature film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1984). Marshall includes a segment of the filmmakers telling the Bushmen how to act like themselves in *N!ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman* (1980), a film that includes footage of N!ai from childhood to the present. As MacDonald explains, Marshall's view of the Kalahari lifestyle is Edenic, and this film is perhaps one of Marshall's greatest accomplishments.

After a twenty-year absence (caused by the government of South Africa who refused him a visa), Marshall returns to find that his friends have been overrun by a reservation. They were taken from their lands as forced labor; some joined the army to earn a living. Starvation and thirst have decimated those trying to return

themselves but their way of life had changed dramatically since Ulys first encountered them. The film did give the San a wider audience and awareness of their plight. Marshal included some footage of Ulys' film in *N!ai*.



N!ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman follows N!ai from her childhood in the 1950s up to 1978. She describes her own experiences and, in so doing, the film allows us to experience her growth as a woman and her observations on living in a government camp. We cannot help but feel the frustration of her situation, one over which she has little control. Colonization is writ large.

to their homeland areas. Both N!ai and Marshall explain the present day situation. Marshall realizes that his youth and the beauty recorded in the 1950s are another Eden now lost. Marshall goes back to his earlier footage, creates a number of films or re-uses footage to see what might have already begun to occur in the earlier decades. Both he and the !Kung Bushmen have evolved, for better or worse. To the Marshall family's great credit, they try to make life better for those now living in a squalid and difficult situation by creating a foundation that not only puts in place a water pump, but also convinces people to return to their own lands to learn to farm and raise cattle.

The five-part TV series, *A Kalahari Family* (2002), recalls many of the changes, and Marshall incorporates his own experiences as part of the story. MacDonald explains,

> "For Marshall, filmmaking was an ongoing pragmatic process that went well beyond learning enough to produce films that audiences might feel they were learning from. He himself continued to engage the people he had filmed and had made films about, and as his awareness expanded, he rethought the earlier conclusions about them that were evident in those films and demonstrated this revised understanding in new work." (59)



A five-part, six-hour series, *A Kalahari Family*, covers 50 years of change in the Ju/'hoansi society. But it also illuminates the experiences of the filmmakers. At an early point in the history of ethnographic film, reflexivity allows us to see how the filmmakers present the material.

Many viewers, especially students, see only the iconic films, *The Hunters* and *N!ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman*. The larger story remains generally untold. Those studying Marshall's film collection will learn much from MacDonald's carefully detailed account of the other films:

> "Marshall's achievement as a film artist is fully evident only to those who have experienced films and videos about the Ju/'hoansi and have understood them as a single ever-evolving meta-work." (59)

Pragmatism underscores MacDonald's discussion throughout the book. All films are presented on multiple levels: the experiences filmed, the filmmakers' process,



The Dani fight a ritual battle in Gardner's *Dead Birds*. Shot without sync-sound, it relied on Gardner's own narrative which many viewers found presumptuous; it singled out two main characters and told us what they were thinking!



Photo courtesy of Robert Gardner. Despite the film's drawbacks for imposing thoughts on the people being portrayed, Gardner's camerawork in *Dead Birds* was exquisite. The chaos of war is obvious in the way Gardner constructs his shot as an overview and with the image of men as insignificant as ants. "Warfare is what makes the film memorable ... Recognizing that he would be ignoring many aspects of Dani life in favor of focusing on violence," Gardner saw violence as the 'essential quality of Dani life'" (Sherman, 40). Indeed, he thought that war would illuminate the whole culture. My experience is that this film is one of the most argued about amongst students because its veracity seems doubtful.

and the audience's spectatorship. Rather than presenting "facts" to viewers, the filmmakers' commitment to "lived experience" includes the shooting and editing of the film, so that we, as the viewers, respond to what we see the subjects experiencing. As MacDonald points out, the filmmaker's experience may be left implicit or made explicit. For Marshall, the "lived experience" of both the San and the Marshall family demonstrates how filmmakers learn from filmmaking and how we perceive what they present to us. If we were to only see Gardner's *Dead Birds* or Marshall's *The Hunters*, that premise is lost. Because MacDonald provides the links to this lived experience, the reader is privy to seeing beyond the frame.

MacDonald's chapter on Gardner is similar to his presentation of the Marshalls' films. Unlike the Marshalls' concentration on one culture, Gardner filmed in many different locations. He wanted to express the artistry of film and of culture. Gardner made some short films in the Pacific Northwest, but these films are less well known than his later ones. *Dead Birds* (1963) was shot in a watershed period before portable sync sound and color film became commonplace in documentary. It is a feature-length film about the Dani of New Guinea that became Gardner's signature film for many years. He was part of an expedition, from which various materials emerged, including the book *Under the Garden Wall* by Peter Matthiessen (1962), and another film about the Dani produced by Karl Heider. *Dead Birds* was later studied along with these supplementary materials.

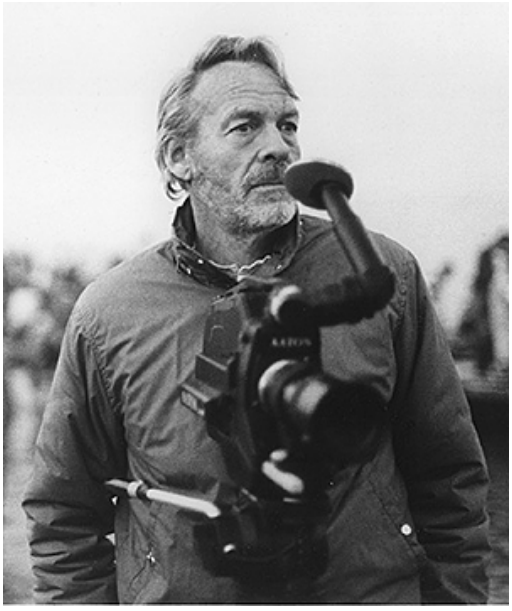
Shown over and over in anthropology classes, *Dead Birds* became the subject of much controversy. Because it was not in sync sound, Gardner narrated. What viewers and academics found presumptuous was Gardner's voice telling audiences what some of the people in the film were *thinking*, especially the two main characters whose lives become symbolic of the whole. These persons, Wejak, a warrior, and Pua, a young swineherd, become Gardner's biographical models, much like Flaherty's use of Nanook. In *Dead Birds*' narrative structure, ritual warfare is the "essential" theme Gardner chooses, and the events in the film underscore that premise. Gardner uses montage, much like Vertov, to build emotion. Like Marshall's *The Hunters*, *Dead Birds* is structured and edited to make audiences reach Gardner's conclusions. Gardner has explained,

> "I seized the opportunity of speaking to certain fundamental issues in human life. The Dani were then less important to me than those issues" (1972:34).

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Robert Gardner in the field.



Hamar women engage in ritual dancing. Note leg and neck irons. Gardner had thought of calling the film *Children of Pain* instead of *Rivers of Sand*. By the time of this film's release, synchronous sound was common and Gardner used a young woman addressing the camera about her life. Although body beautification is featured, the relationship between men and women paints a dismal view of life for women who are beaten by their husbands, and must move to the husband's village upon marriage. Critics have suggested that Gardner overplayed this theme of strife between the genders. In one ritual dancing scene, a young women being

MacDonald discusses Gardner's films about artists and also his cinematography for *The Nuer* (1971), but then proceeds to *Rivers of Sand* (1974) about pastoralists. Again, Gardner's effort would be controversial because he sees those he studies in *Rivers of Sand*, the Hamar of Ethiopia, as people of pain. MacDonald points to the influence of other ethnographers' films, and also the relation between cultural change and Gardner's own awareness of it. Just as the Vietnam war may have affected Gardner's seeing the focal point of Dani life in ritual warfare, *Rivers of Sand* (1974) reflects his consideration of gender relations, an idea not only suggested by the dynamics of Hamar women's situation, but also his awareness of feminism. MacDonald recognizes this possible underlying cultural shift to emphasize the portrayal of Hamar relationships:

> "Gardner has always been reasonably astute about the cultural currents evolving around him, and the emergence of a powerful feminist transformation in American society in general, and in American academe in particular, during the 1970s is reflected in *Rivers of Sand*. Indeed, Gardner's decision to focus on the Hamar seems to have reflected his own developing gender awareness." (75)

Concentrating on "the essence" of a society has made Gardner the subject of numerous anthropological critiques (see, for example, Ruby 1991, 1992, who has stated that these films do not represent anthropological issues). MacDonald notes, "I see *Rivers* as an amalgam of feminism and surrealism." (77) That the grinding stones were used as a metaphor for women who become worn down, for example, is explicitly stated in an extensive interview with Omali Inda. Like N!ai, this person carries the film. But, much to the chagrin of anthropology students, the film does not offer a cultural overview (I sat in an outraged audience who attended a screening in Bloomington at Indiana University in 1974).

For Gardner's work that follows, MacDonald aligns Gardner with other filmmaking styles. *Forest of Bliss* (1986) shot in Benares, India, seems to have certain parallels with city symphony documentaries, a discussion of which in MacDonald's book becomes somewhat of an historical tangent. Gardner makes life in Benares appear as if it were occurring on one day from morning until night. Like in *Dead Birds*, mortality is a central issue. The film depicts the burning of bodies and shows the "burying" of bodies in the Ganges.

Two years later, in *Ika Hands* (1988), Gardner depicts daily life in Mamingeka. Here he concentrates on the spiritual actions of one individual who is considered a mystic. Gardner also appears in the film. MacDonald presents each of Gardner's endeavors, often seeing them as metaphors for larger aspects of life. He includes "The Screening Room," an ABC Boston affiliate program in which Gardner interviews numerous filmmakers. The series lasted from 1972 to 1981 and gave filmmakers a platform to interest audiences in the educational significance of their films.

As the head of the Film Study Center, Gardner aided in the production of a number of films. He created the non-profit Studio7 Arts and continued to support the filmmaking of others. Like Marshall, Gardner was a major force in the development of ethnographic film. Unlike Marshall, as MacDonald demonstrates, Gardner's idea was to make artistic films. Their beauty startles those of us who have seen them. Gardner wrote an autobiography based on his journals, and

whipped by a man from a clan into which she might marry, smiles at the boy and openly flirts. Are we seeing pain or ritual courtship? Photo courtesy of Robert Gardner.





Rowing on the Ganges in Benares, India. Like the City Symphonies, Gardner arranges *Forest of Bliss* as if all the events occur on one day although events were documented over many months. Death and cremation prove the rituals of life and death are peppered with repetition and beauty amidst squalor. The narration present in Gardner's earlier films disappears with but a few brief remarks. Sync-sound and the long takes of cinema verité had permeated Gardner's approach to his subjects and he also began to include himself. The aesthetic beauty of his shots always stood out in composition, color contrasts, and placement of the image in the frame. Photos courtesy of Robert Gardner.

others have reviewed and analyzed Gardner's films, so that MacDonald has much data upon which to draw. Perhaps most valuable is MacDonald's arranging of these films, his conscientious digging for connections and obscure references that only a small group of ethnographic film "fans" might know. Adding to this mountain of documents, MacDonald's own insights lend a new look, a fresh analysis.

MacDonald applies a similar polish, albeit shorter, to the films of Timothy Asch. Although Asch taught at many universities, including Harvard, he received his B.A. from Columbia, and also studied with photographers Ansel Adams, Minor White, and Edward Weston in California. Margaret Mead suggested to Gardner that Asch was someone who would work well with Marshall. Rather than his work at Cambridge and his collaboration with Marshall, I believe Asch's work on the Yanomamö of southern Venezuela made with anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon from 1968 to 1975 is his hallmark. A number of documentaries that they created out of the 80,000 feet of film they shot are used in anthropology classes and discussed in histories of ethnographic film. Altogether, sixty events were shot (Asch 1975:398). Chagnon's *The Fierce People* (1968) is often the companion text that students read when they see these films. In terms of style, using Marshall's idea of sequence filming, Asch concentrates on one event, for example, *The Feast* (1968), breaking it up into sequences. The film opens with still shots and translations to situate the viewer. The second part is in sync sound with English subtitles sparingly used. This technique shows the Yanomamö as real humans rather than "noble savages."

MacDonald very briefly mentions James V. Neel, the first organizer of the expedition and a geneticist, who studied the Yanomamö medically to vaccinate them against what he perceived as the threat of measles. MacDonald makes little reference to the measles epidemic that might have been brought about by Neel inoculating the Yanomamö.

Although barely discussed in the scholarship until years after this event glossed over by MacDonald, Patrick Tierney in *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon* (2000) accused the scholars of being part of a biomedical experiment that caused hundreds of deaths among the Yanomamö. Much has been written about the perceived scandal (most famously Tierney's article, "The Fierce Anthropologist" in *The New Yorker,* October 9, 2000; see also Tierney's book 2000), but perhaps, more important, the controversy ended anthropology's study of indigenous peoples. Postmodernism also eliminated ideas about such groups. Indigenous cultures now began documenting and reading and writing about themselves. The shift to the internal study of anthropologists began.

I cannot blame MacDonald for not taking up this controversial thread but it is a significant part of Asch's story. Chagnon was also accused of "doctoring" the film *The Ax Fight* (1975). MacDonald does provide a detailed account of *The Ax Fight* and how it underscored the filmmakers' awareness of their changing understanding of what had occurred. Asch re-edited the film twenty-five times in one semester. MacDonald explains how Asch was

> "examining the footage itself and learning how various versions of the material affected audiences. Each film screening made them aware of their relationship to representations of the experiences of others." (125)

Asch later worked with wife Patsy Asch and anthropologist Linda Connor (who is not mentioned) documenting Balinese healers. In 1982, Asch became the director of USC's Center for Visual Anthropology. Asch's films in Bali are basically passed over.



Preparing for *The Feast* by Asch. Timothy Asch, having worked with both Gardner and Marshall, became a part of the powerful triumvirate of the academic ethnographic filmmakers. Their work is still repeatedly shown in anthropology, experimental, and documentary film courses. Ironically, both Marshall and Gardner used women as central characters for two of their best known films, *N!ai* and *Rivers of Sand*, but most of their work focused on men's activities. Few women are even alluded to in the history. And few female filmmakers were active at the time. Mead is an exception and was Asch's inspiration and mentor but she was not part of the Cambridge group within which MacDonald frames his story. I must point out that. at UCLA, women were a part of the story by the 1970s—Judith MacDougall, Chick Strand and others.



Asch and Chagnon document the tensions of *The Axe Fight*. The emphasis on one event or ritual became an important idea in my own film practice, which tends to focus on the rituals of everyday and celebratory life. Sequence filming became a means of structuring the films around events.

Two less well-known films about the telling of myth, *The Yanomamö Myth of Naro as told by Kaobawa* and The *Yanomamö Myth of Naro as Told by Dedeheiwa,* became "effective for comparative analyses of myths told in two different villages. Performance, including kinesics and voice intonations, may also be compared as can the actual wording. In the second film, the

Asch's awareness of "truth" was shattered and he considered anthropology at

> "the end of an era. ... The whole idea of making an accurate representation blew up in my face" (quoted in Ruby 2000:128).

In MacDonald's book, this statement by Asch provides a segue into MacDonald's discussion of the personal documentary, a seemingly different approach than that taken by anthropologists, yet one that MacDonald demonstrates does have a strong connection to ethnographic film:

> "[I]n the films of the Marshalls, Robert Gardner and Timothy Asch, the quest to objectively document long-surviving cultures under the threat of transformation by the relentless spread of modern life led first to idealized fantasies, then to careers in which the personal lives, beliefs, and the filmmaking and teaching activities of the filmmakers themselves became increasingly central. The inverse has tended to be true in the history of personal documentary. What began as a variety of attempts to depict and analyze the filmmakers' most personal feelings and activities has increasingly become ethnographic evidence about life in the United States, including the changing role of filmmaking within family life" (134).

The personal documentary emerges at Cambridge in the midst of the tumultuous '60s and '70s. Now carrying sync-sound portable camera units that only required two people (camera and sound), filmmakers could rush to keep up with events as they occurred. Recognizing how daily life presented themes for the camera, these filmmakers eventually turned the camera inward to documenting the ordinary, sometimes recording events spoken of by older family members recalling the past, and at other times looking at life's interactions within marriages, births, and friendships. The women's movement had much to do with the shift, as the motto "the personal is political" became the harbinger of social and personal change.

MacDonald, well known for his analyses of the avant-garde filmmakers (for example, *Avant-Garde Film: Motion Studies* (Cambridge Film Classics, 1993); and *Avant-Doc: Intersections of Documentary and Avant-Garde Cinema* (Oxford, 2014), explains that these avant-garde films were precursors of the personal documentary, which regularly examines the familial. For example, Stan Brakage, often referred to by MacDonald, records events with a hand-held camera, and looks into his own marriage. His expressive depiction of a couple's behavior is clear in the idiosyncratic editing of such films as *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959). The film became an experimental yet controversial one for showing Brakhage's wife's vagina as she gives birth to their daughter. MacDonald notes that few have seen it. Brakage thought he could only be present if he was making a film or else he would faint. Jane turns the camera on him to capture his reaction.

Numerous examples of personal documentaries made in Cambridge follow.

tale teller assumes the roles of the characters as he discusses them. These two films demonstrate the function of myth in society, the performative nature of storytelling, and the competent use of film for folklore research" (Sherman, 39), but they are rarely mentioned in the literature. Ironically, folklorists tended to study parts of culture—ritual, folksong, food, games; whereas anthropologists were thought to cover culture at large. With sequence filming that gap narrowed and anthropologists documented what were actually folkloric events.

As academic fieldworkers began to realize their impact on those they studied, they saw the relationship as a two-way street (See Georges and Jones, 1980). Moreover, one's personal view into one's own life and family seemed more accurate. It had its own "truth." As women had proclaimed, "the personal is political." Let the personal reign. A number of personal documentaries made in Cambridge followed.



Edward Pincus with his wife Jane in *Diaries.* His first two films about divisions in the civil rights movement led Pincus to question objectivity. Open marriage, the women's movement, and his own personal life became his subject.



Ed and Jane Pincus in 1981. New portable film equipment allowed a film to be made with one person. Pincus shot his own life's events and personal interactions over a 5-year period. Using 28 hours of the footage, he created *Diaries,* a

Miriam Weinstein, part of the new generation of female filmmakers, made four films about her middle-class life. MacDonald describes them all, but I found her use of the camera to "persuade" her future husband Peter to marry her the most poignant and pragmatic of her films. In *My Father the Doctor* (1972), Weinstein's interview with her father includes his disappointment that she did not study to be a doctor and thus, according to him, use her brain. In *Living with Peter* (1973), Weinstein talks with Peter about getting married. *We Get Married Twice* (1973) and *Call Me Mama* (1976) continue her personal feminist filmmaking.

The films and impact of Edward Pincus are presented in detail. Pincus is known to many of us as the author, with Steven Ascher, of *The Filmmaker's Handbook* (first published in 1984 and used as a popular textbook). After making a few political films, Pincus turned the camera on himself. His *Diaries* (1971-76) are described in detail, perhaps, because, as MacDonald notes, the films have not been in distribution since the 1980s (although the Harvard Film Archive has hosted retrospectives). Pincus also taught future generations of filmmakers at MIT and Harvard.

Diaries is a tour de force is tracing one family's struggle with open marriage, a not uncommon occurrence in the 1970s as couples began to experiment with breaking traditional mores. Pincus, in particular, "opens" the marriage by bringing another woman into the fold and into the film. She would be the first of many as the film echoes the sexual revolution underway. Pincus's wife Jane is depicted as uncomfortable at the beginning, but by the end has taken on several lovers of her own. Throughout the series, Ed and Jane's children also contribute to the picture of the family. Pincus's idea was to shoot his family for five years, then not edit the footage until five years later. The ten-year project eventually became five films edited together into a total of 200 minutes in 1980. It is, as MacDonald says, "a personal epic," a family sacrificed and exposed to the ever-present camera. The secrecy of sex and marital relationships kept hidden in the 1950s are now personal and open. The book covers this epic in great detail, so much so that I found myself wanting to see it. Pincus moved his family to Vermont and started a flower farm as a means of escaping from a mentally ill man who threatened to kill him and his family, and who did kill civil rights attorney Allard Lowenstein in 1980. In 2007, Pincus returned to filmmaking and made a film with Lucia Small about Hurricane Katrina. Discovering that he had acute myeloid leukemia, Pincus began a film about his own death. He died at the age of 75 in 2013.

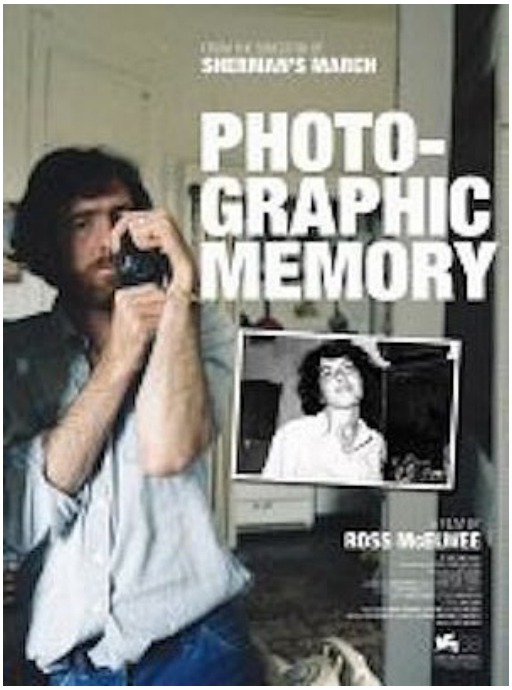
The personal documentary assumes several different forms over the years, and MacDonald chronicles the filmmakers who adopted this approach in a fashion not unlike cinema verité. In addition to Weinstein, who had been Pincus's student, MacDonald addresses the films of Alfred Guzzetti, Ross McElwee, Robb Moss, Nina Davenport, Steve Ascher and Jeanne Jordan, Michel Negroponte, John Gianvito, Alexander Olch, Amie Siegel, Ilisa Barbash, and Lucien Castaing-Taylor. Barbash and Taylor had studied filmmaking at USC with Timothy Asch and later established the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard. *In and Out of Africa* (1992), their film about dealing in indigenous art, has had meaningful distribution, as has the film *Sweetgrass* (2009). Their book, *Cross Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos* (1997), has become a standard reference for classes in anthropology and film.

Of these personal documentary filmmakers, perhaps Ross McElwee is best known to a wide audience. After decades of films without narration, McElwee introduces *Sherman's March* (1986) with a narration by Ricky Leacock. The in-joke, to those who knew Leacock, one of the founders of cinema verité in the United States, is that he abhorred narration. As MacDonald presents McElwee's training at MIT, he points to Ricky Leacock and Ed Pincus as McElwee's models, with Leacock's *Happy Mother's Day* (1963) and Ed Pincus's *Diaries* being perhaps the most

three-and-a-half hour film.



Ross McElwee makes his son (and almost everything else in his life) part of his saga through seven films that become his autobiography. McElwee became a "crossover" filmmaker with *Sherman's March,* which had widespread distribution in feature-run theaters and then enjoyed success on television



McElwee's *Photographic Memory* is an intensive journey into oneself as director, cameraman, and interpreter. Like Pincus's work, some critics found it self-indulgent.

prominent examples affecting McElwee's own development as a filmmaker.

McElwee is the preeminent autobiographical filmmaker of the personal documentary. Seven films take us from a focus on his friend *Charleen* (1979), whom McElwee saw as a representative of the South, to *Backyard* (about his own parents and the contrast between them and the African Americans they employed), to *Sherman's March: A Meditation on the Possibility of Romantic Love in the South during an Era of Nuclear Weapons Proliferation* (1985), ostensibly about McElwee following Sherman's march during the Civil War, but looking for the love of a Southern woman. What makes McElwee's work stand out is his use of narration in the present tense of the film, the present tense of his edit of the film, and that of the projection of the film. These three time periods blend in a meta-dance of "reality," displayed by McElwee's films. MacDonald explains how McElwee situates himself from the opening scene:

> "McElwee develops both his McElwee character and our consciousness of him as director, confirming the comic mood … and beginning the complex approach that made *Sherman's March* a breakthrough not only for McElwee but for autobiographical filmmaking" (200).

He clarifies,

> "McElwee is present simultaneously as a character within the action and as a commentator on the action" (200-01).

Throughout his seven films, culminating in *Photographic Memory* (2011), audiences see McElwee's life unfold. He becomes the man with the camera, carrying it everywhere. Eventually we meet his future wife Marilyn, witness the birth of his son and the adoption of his daughter, and the depiction of his relationship with his son who has become a grown man. At one point, McElwee observes,

> "It seems like I'm filming my life in order to have a life to film" (207).

McElwee's *The Five O'Clock News* (1996) illustrates this filmic life as a news team comes to document him and he documents them doing so. McElwee then takes his camera on a journey to document events of the type that the daily news crews cover. Like *Sherman's March*, *The Five O'Clock News* enjoyed a great deal of play on television.

But what happens when life becomes less eventful, MacDonald queries:

> "It seems an occupational hazard of autobiographical documentary that at some point what has seemed both an engaging and convenient subject for cinema--the filmmaker's personal and family life—becomes a limitation. … [O]nce the problems with parents, love, life or personal loss have been dealt with cinematically, what then is the autobiographical filmmaker to do?" (227)

McElwee's films serve as a connection between ethnographic film and personal documentary that MacDonald brings to the forefront. McElwee's *Sherman's March* is a film made by a man who has now become a Northerner:

> "Obviously it would be somewhat of a stretch to call *Sherman's March* an ethnographic film, and yet, McElwee's lovelorn character is in large part a disguise that allows him to create a memorable and intimate panorama of a region of the country and the people who live there that can seem as natural as the worlds we visit in Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* and *Deep Hearts*" (205-206).

For those of us who may find it difficult to see all this meaning implied by McElwee's life on camera, the films may seem to focus on people from someone else's country. To me, the films are self-indulgent—too personal to "see" one's own life reflected in any way. For Pincus' films, the time frame and directness appear relevant; for McElwee's work, I find myself not caring. Ironically, when I explain that films that I make are documentaries, people often respond with a comment about having seen and enjoyed McElwee's *Sherman's March,* or the films of Michael Moore, another documentary filmmaker who places his own personality at the center of his investigative work.

The Cambridge filmmakers might be seen as a clique, albeit one of the most influential groupings of documentarists. UCLA's ethnographic filmmakers, from Colin Young to David MacDougall, comprise yet another such group. Other than quotes about certain films and their makers, however, MacDougall only appears in one line in this book despite his having taught at Harvard for a brief time. MacDougall is certainly worthy of greater discussion but he doesn't quite fit the mode MacDonald has established. MacDougall was one of the first scholar-filmmakers to write about ethnographic film. And one might devote greater detail to Ricky Leacock rather than Robb Moss, to whom MacDonald devotes an entire chapter. For an overview of the ethnographic movement at large, Eliot Weinberger's "The Camera People" (1992) provides a historical perspective not limited to Cambridge.



Ilsa Barbash and Lucien Castaing-Taylor studied with Asch but moved to Harvard. Their film, *Sweetgrass,* follows sheepherders as they move their flocks to summer pasture. A paean to nature and culture. Marvelous images made it a highly awarded film in 2010.

MacDonald's book paints a master stroke detailing connections between ethnographic and personal documentaries, the avant-garde and the personal documentary, literature, and the 19th century landscape paintings that he sees in some of these subjects and about which he has also published. MacDonald takes the reader up to the present with examples of documentary reflexivity and hybridity. He also remarks that the personal, in today's technological universe, may become a threat to privacy. We need only to "stay tuned" to perhaps see MacDonald take up this topic in greater depth for his next book.

The present book is detailed and indicative of the many categories of film that overlap. As a filmmaker and an academic folklorist, I have always maintained that filmmakers are actually documenting themselves when they shoot "others" (Sherman 1998). MacDonald's connection between the ethnographic and the personal documentary is a fitting and eloquent book topic that draws attention to the blurring of lines between filmic categories and styles. This book may also explain what ethnographic film is in a manner that speaks to an educated public. While writing this review, I found myself asking colleagues who were not in film studies or anthropology what they thought about ethnographic film. It was an unknown concept to them. I am optimistic that MacDonald's book will enlighten them.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



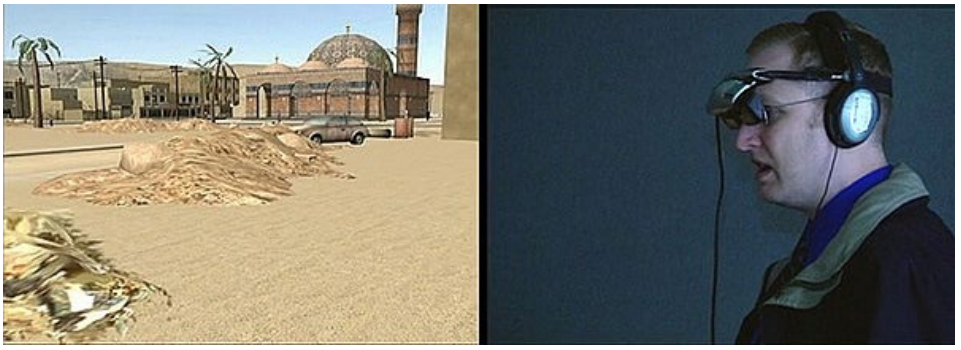
The Iraq War as videogame in *Full Spectrum Warrior*

Virtual battlegrounds: the multiple realisms of Harun Farocki's *Immersion*

by Daniel Grinberg

"I can't do this anymore," a distressed man named Kevin states in Harun Farocki's *Immersion*.[1] [open notes in new window] The third installment in the late German director's 2009 *Serious Games* series, the twenty-minute documentary displays Kevin on half of the screen, while the other half of the screen depicts his first-person perspective. As his digital counterpart navigates a simulacrum of an Iraqi village, he grows more unsettled. "I can't... I can't," he tells Barbara, the therapist guiding him through the experience. However, at her insistence, he continues to describe witnessing the death of a soldier named Jones in the second Iraq War. He says,

> "I'm freaking out and, uh, and so there's more gunfire and it's come in closer and I'm like, 'this is it, this is seriously it. I've only been here for three weeks and I'm seriously going to be like paste, like Jones.'"



Kevin telling the traumatic story of Jones through Virtual Iraq

Although this sequence appears to archive a veteran experiencing a harrowing instance of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the applause that concludes this session of virtual reality exposure therapy (VRET) abruptly reconfigures the documentary viewers' conception of reality. The applause and the participants' subsequent conversation about their roles reveal that *Immersion* has not been documenting an actual VRET session. Instead, as the closing credits finally make clear, it has documented a performance of a session that demonstrates the uses of the Virtual Iraq technology for an audience of military psychologists.

In the following article, I will contextualize the development of Virtual Iraq and the political and aesthetic dimensions of Harun Farocki's oeuvre. Subsequently, I will consider how the jarring re-formation of the profilmic reality underscores a multitude of interrelated forms of realism within the film. This includes the

phenomenological realism of Kevin's physiological responses, the simulated realism of the virtual reality technology, and the realism associated with the documentary genre. Ultimately, I contend that Farocki is concurrently drawing upon all these theoretical frameworks of realism to evoke an overarching Brechtian realism rooted in Marxist ideology and radical defamiliarization. In this light, the project's objective then is not only to document war trauma, but also reflexively to provoke viewers to question the state and complicit mainstream media apparatuses that construct false realities and manufacture wars.

Fittingly, Bertolt Brecht has argued,

> "Realism is not a mere question of form. Were we to copy the style of [established] realists, we would no longer be realists. ... Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must change."[2]

By elucidating the facets of these generative methods and modes within *Immersion*, I will explore how their concatenations establish an engaged realism for viewers and trenchantly condemn the Second Iraq War and the overreach of the U.S. military-industrial complex.

Contextualizing Virtual Iraq

The creation and championing of Virtual Iraq, the virtual reality technology at the center of *Immersion*, is most closely associated with Dr. Albert "Skip" Rizzo. A clinical psychologist, research professor at the University of Southern California (USC), and Director for Medical Virtual Reality at USC's Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT),[3] Rizzo was a cognitive-rehabilitation therapist at a California hospital in the early 1990s.[4] In his work then, he noticed that his predominantly young, male patients devoted more energy to playing with their hand-held Game Boy devices than to doing their cognitive exercises.[5] This observation spurred him to design virtual reality tools for clinical usage; after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, he shifted to applications for veteran traumas.[6]

In spite of the Bush administration's triumphalist "horseshit" in the invasion's early days, Rizzo anticipated an influx of U.S. veterans would return with PTSD.[7] In the process of developing a tool geared toward treating war's after-effects, he found a videogame that the ICT had been involved in building. That game, *Full Spectrum Warrior*, allows players to role-play as squad leaders and to perform real-time tactical combat operations. He decided to modify the content and give the game a therapeutic function. Rizzo stated,

> "When I saw [the game], it looked just like Iraq. In my mind, anyway—I'd never been to Iraq. But it had that Middle Eastern look to it."[8]



A view from the helicopter landing zone in Virtual Vietnam



A view from inside the combat helicopter in



Another virtual view from inside the

Virtual Vietnam	helicopter

Rizzo contacted ICT researcher Jarrell Pair, who had been the project manager of Virtual Vietnam in the late 1990s. Virtual Vietnam, a key precursor to Virtual Iraq, was the first virtual reality simulation designed to treat war-based PTSD.[9] Using more rudimentary technical elements and basic graphics, it featured one scenario in which users would sit in a vibrating chair while virtually riding a combat helicopter.[10] The other available scenario allowed users to navigate through a helicopter landing zone.[11] Though Virtual Vietnam showed promising initial results and gained traction in the Atlanta Veterans Administration Hospital, the project ultimately did not receive widespread implementation.[12]



A soldier and military psychologist using the Virtual Iraq technology

Based on the graphics from *Full Spectrum Warrior*, Rizzo and Pair built a prototype of Virtual Iraq. Their project received $4 million funding from the Office of Naval Research, allotted to continue developing the system and to conduct tests of VRET treatment at Army medical centers in California and Hawaii.[13] Based on one clinical trial of 24 active-duty soldiers that used Virtual Iraq for VRET, 45 percent of the participants recovered from PTSD and another 17 percent reduced their symptoms.[14] Other studies of military personnel have shown similarly promising results of treating or mitigating PTSD.[15] In the following years, developers from the ICT and other colleagues have collaboratively continued to add more features and scenarios. They have also adapted the terrains, architecture, and design of the program to create a comparable version called Virtual Afghanistan for U.S. veterans of the war in Afghanistan.[16] The Iraq and Afghanistan virtual systems are collectively referred to as Bravemind, which is currently in use at over 60 sites such as military bases, VA hospitals, and universities.[17]



A simulated city street in Virtual Iraq



A road checkpoint in Virtual Iraq



A road with mountains in the distance in Virtual Afghanistan

Though Virtual Iraq is only used for therapeutic purposes to treat military personnel serving on tour or after their tours of duty, its close resemblance to combat training simulations has become a point of contention for some critics. According to Joram ten Brink and Joshua Oppenheimer,

> "That [similar] moving images used to help individuals forget the trauma of war [are] *also* used to make soldiers more effective fighting machines is, again, an ironic corollary to [Jean-Luc] Godard's proposition that forgetting violence may be, in this case quite literally, part of the apparatus of violence."[18]

As I discuss in greater depth later, Farocki also called attention to the disconcerting parallel between the two systems. He did so by juxtaposing footage from Virtual Battlespace 2: US Army (VBS2) and Virtual Iraq in a split-screen. The military describes the former system as a

> "3-D, first-person, games-for-training platform that provides realistic, semi-immersive environments, dynamic terrain areas, hundreds of simulated military and civilian entities, and a range of geo-typical (generic) as well as actual geo-specific terrains."

Thus, like so many other instances in his filmography, Farocki critically deployed the dialectical power of images to underscore and interrogate the often-unchecked power of images.



Virtually training soldiers in *Virtual Battlespace 2*



Conducting a mission in *Virtual Battlespace 2*

Contextualizing the work of Harun Farocki

Near the end of his nearly fifty-year career as a politically committed director, screenwriter, essayist, and media theorist, Harun Farocki (1944-2014) fittingly coalesced many of his lifelong interests and techniques to create the series of works he called *Serious Games I-IV* (2009-2010). Among the corpus of the ninety-plus films he directed, most of which are short experimental

documentaries, Farocki often evinced a deep investment in critically exploring the enmeshments of warfare, state policy, social institutions, and mass media technologies. Tied to these issues, he also frequently addressed concerns around how we see and perceive (or fail to see and perceive) these enmeshments via media representations, as well as the social, economic, and political conditions that underlie the productions of these representations.

To draw attention to the instrumentalization of media for the manipulation and control of subjects, Farocki also reappropriated found footage and industrial images. He formally manipulated them to elucidate their strategic constructedness and used montage and juxtaposition to evoke the interrelations between two seemingly disparate things. As he stated, his intention was to "investigate pictures, [and] take them apart to reveal their elements."[19]

According to Thomas Elsaesser, Farocki had at least three requirements to determine whether he would address a subject:

> "[H]e must be able to picture the phenomenon in its details as well as show it partakes of a larger process; he must be able to establish, however obliquely, a level of reflexive self-reference; and finally, he must be able to hint at a hidden centre, an Archimedean point, more often sensed than seen."[20]



The director, writer, and theorist Harun Farocki [20]

These objectives and techniques suggest the strong influence that other Marxist artist-critic-theorists like Bertolt Brecht and Jean-Luc Godard had on informing Farocki's approach to cinema. His decision to produce nearly all of his work independently instead of accepting public sponsorship also acutely informed his creative process. These financial constraints shaped "his politics of image production: formally, stylistically, thematically, and materially" in many ways, including his tactical recycling of commercial footage and his making of industrial documentaries to finance his more critical, politically didactic projects.[21]

Many of Farocki's most prominent films incisively confront the direct and more diffused institutional violences of war, albeit through unexpected and experimental methods. One instance is *The Inextinguishable Fire* (1969), in which the director first reads a transcript of testimony from a victim of U.S.-led napalm raids in Vietnam and then burns his own forearm with a cigarette. This sequence condemns the military-industrial complex and Dow Chemical's production of Napalm B for the Vietnam War, while simultaneously investigating how to most effectively use audiovisual means to alert audiences to war's inhumanities.



Testing out equipment in *Eye/Machine II*

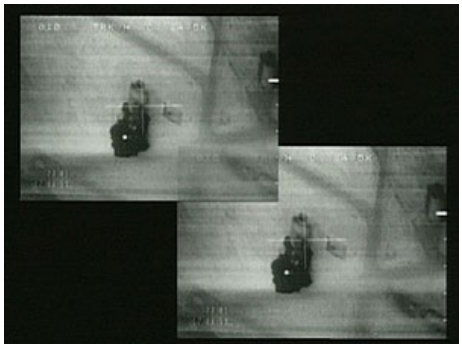
More recently, Farocki made the trilogy *Eye/Machine I-III* (2001-2003), which uses images gathered from industrial and military surveillance technologies and traces the development of automated targeting systems. This footage accentuates the potentially fatal linkages between human and machine perception in warfare and interrogates the intensifying technologization of weapons and killing.



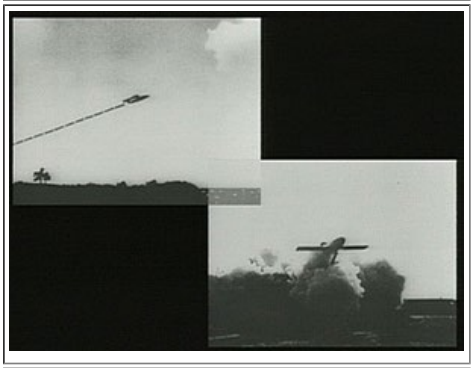
Farocki appearing in *The Inextinguishable Fire*



Farocki burning his arm as embodied and cinematic protest in *The Inextinguishable Fire*

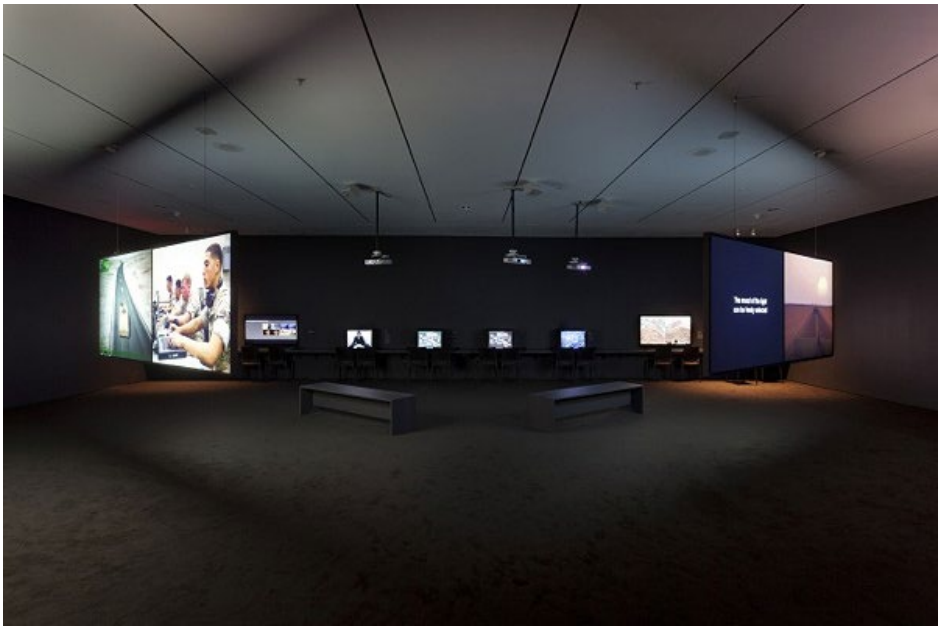


Machine-assisted visions of aerial targeting in *Eye/Machine I*



More vantages of vision and war technologies in *Eye/Machine III*

In 2011-2012, a comprehensive exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, "Harun Farocki: Images of War (at a Distance)," showcased the intersections of war and media throughout the director's oeuvre. The exhibition, which displayed over thirty works and highlighted Farocki's long-term practice of video installation, also marked the U.S. premiere of *Serious Games I-IV*.[22] In that presentation, three of the four parts of the series were shown on two-channel video screens, while the other part, *Three Dead*, played on a single-channel screen. Thus, Farocki's commitment to experimentation occurred here both at the levels of form and format.



Installation view of *Serious Games* and other works from *Images of War (at a Distance)* at the Museum of Modern Art[24]



Another view of Farocki's MOMA exhibition[25]

Placing the multi-channel videos in a museum setting invited viewers not only to experience the texts in more adaptable ways, but also to reflect on how the

differential ways of visualizing and perceiving information can produce a variety of engagements. In this way, the museum presentation enabled viewers to experience the proliferation and simultaneity of information in an age of overwhelming mass media. Consequently, harkening back to early films like *The Inextinguishable Fire,* this emplaced arrangement of *Serious Games* reflexively pointed to the intense difficulty of fully immersing oneself in images of war. Like much of Farocki's work, it also called attention to the multiple layers of intentional and contingent mediation that invariably negotiate the experiences of both filming and watching a filmed "reality."[24] Concurrently, across these dual channels and multiple screens, a range of juxtaposed realisms also prompted engaged viewers to realize how the military and state strategically manipulates the realities of war, the topic that I will explore in the following sections.

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Phenomenological realism

As Kevin is utilizing Virtual Iraq in *Immersion*, the text makes it evident that his VRET experience is not only visual but multisensory.



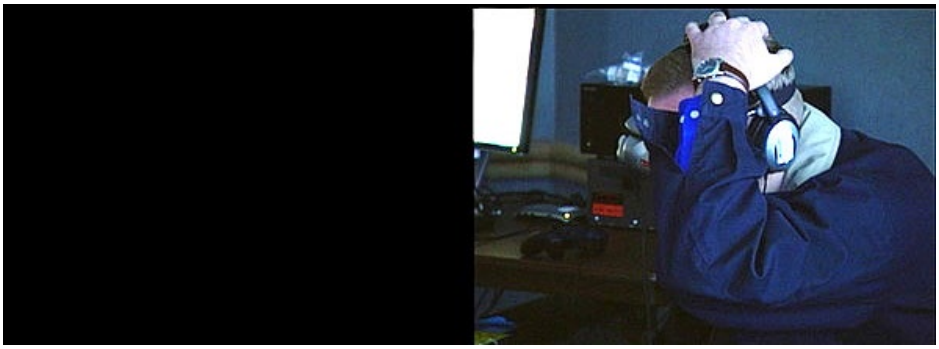
Kevin modulating his virtual perspective through a head-mounted display

We can observe that Kevin's head-mounted display is spatially modulated, meaning that his virtual self is mirroring his physical movements. In addition, he is cradling a prop M4 rifle in his hand, which both provides a sense of haptic verisimilitude and contains a gamepad that facilitates virtual navigation.[25] [open notes in new window] Through these controls, he can participate in different kinds of movement, including walking through streets, entering buildings, climbing onto rooftops, or riding in a Humvee.[26] Throughout the experience, he can also feel sensations that replicate tactile impacts like explosions and bumpy roads through the platform he is standing on and hear noises such as bullets, mortar shells, wind, traffic, or helicopter blades through his headphones.[27] The technology is additionally equipped with a scent palette that can emit representative smells like gasoline, Middle Eastern spices, burning rubber, and even body odor to enhance the sense of immersion.[28]

This array of sensorial features is intended to catalyze the recollection of traumas by surpassing the optical. As Laura U. Marks notes,

> "It is not accidental that certain experiences are most likely to be 'recorded' only in the nonaudiovisual registers of touch, smell, and taste. The fabric of everyday experience that tends to elude verbal and visual records is encoded in these senses."[29]

Therefore, by mimetically reproducing the bodily sensations of Second Iraq War veterans, the technology is drawing on a phenomenological realism to help the participants access otherwise inaccessible knowledge.



Crouching as an embodiment of PTSD's phenomenological impacts

The realism of the simulation simultaneously engenders more realistic phenomenological reactions from the participants. Throughout his session, Kevin is connected to machines that monitor and evaluate his physiological responses, such as his heart rate, breathing levels, body temperature, and even his palm sweat.[30] At the most intense moment in his retelling, when he attests that he is "freaking out," he crouches down and covers his head. With his voice quivering, he also states that he is the verge of vomiting. Together, this collection of reactions appears to fit the characterization of PTSD, which is a condition that is "precipitated by a terrifying event or situation" and "characterized by nightmares, flashbacks, and intrusive and uncontrollable thoughts, as well as by emotional detachment, numbness, jumpiness, anger, and avoidance."[31]

By showing this range of bodily indicators, Farocki's film realistically conveys the intense distress that the recollection of traumas can induce. In addition, Kevin's sensorial responses become an epistemological resource for viewers and may affect their perceptions of these phenomena on a similarly sensory level. Vivian Sobchack describes the power of cinema to

> "transpos[e] what would otherwise be the direct, individual, and intrasubjective privacy of direct experience as it is embodied into the visible, public, and intersubjective sociality of a language of direct embodied experience."[32]

In other words, viewers can feel sensations and make sense by watching characters feel sensations and make sense within their cinematic reality. Along a similar line of thought, Roger Hallas has proposed the concept of 'corporeal implication,' which implicates viewers' bodies "in the act of bearing witness . . . through a simultaneously visceral and imaginative encounter."[33] In these ways, the title of the film refers not only to soldiers immersed in warfare and veterans immersed in VRET, but to the viewers who may become affectively, phenomenologically, and physically immersed in the painful realities of this depiction.

The corporeal implication of Kevin's portrayal is vital to evoking the serious, long-term consequences that combat soldiers routinely endure, especially in light of the pervasive marginality of veteran health in the mass media and the public imaginary. For instance, a 2012 Department of Veteran Affairs report stated that nearly 30% of the 830,000-plus Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who sought treatment at VA hospitals and clinics were diagnosed with PTSD,[34] a figure that does not even account for the traumatized veterans who did not seek help through that channel. A Department of Defense study registered the impacts of war even more starkly when it found that U.S. veterans were committing suicide at a rate of 22 per day in 2012.[35] More recently, the Veteran Affairs scandal in May 2014 revealed that some of the department's medical centers were falsifying data to conceal the months-long delays veterans could face to receive treatment and

underscored the institutional devaluation of the physical and mental health of U.S. military personnel.[36]

Simulated realism

In a preceding sequence of *Immersion*, Skip Rizzo is describing the Virtual Iraq interface's array of customizable features for the camera. As he provides an onscreen presentation, he notes that

> "over time, we expanded the environment . . . [and] made it so you could adjust the time of day, the weather conditions, sandstorms, night vision, building interiors."

He proceeds to exhibit the newly added ability to change locations mid-session. This commitment to adaptability shows the developers' quest to produce a convincing verisimilitude while also enabling the therapists to instantly alter settings in ways that exceed reality. The evident logic behind this credible level of detail is to help participants more effectively process their repressed traumas. However, an underlying economic motive may be to promote the array of technically impressive features as a figurative and literal selling point of the technology.



Skip Rizzo outlining the customizable features of Virtual Iraq

As Kevin's demonstration shows, the simulated realism of walking through an Iraqi town allows veterans to confront painfully traumatic events at a safer, more removed distance. They can hear bullets and experience the force of exploding bombs without the risk of being physically injured. Over the course of multiple sessions, they can also gradually work up to more intense scenarios in a controlled environment with the supervision of a therapist. Outlining her experience of using VRET to treat veterans, psychologist Karen Perlman says,

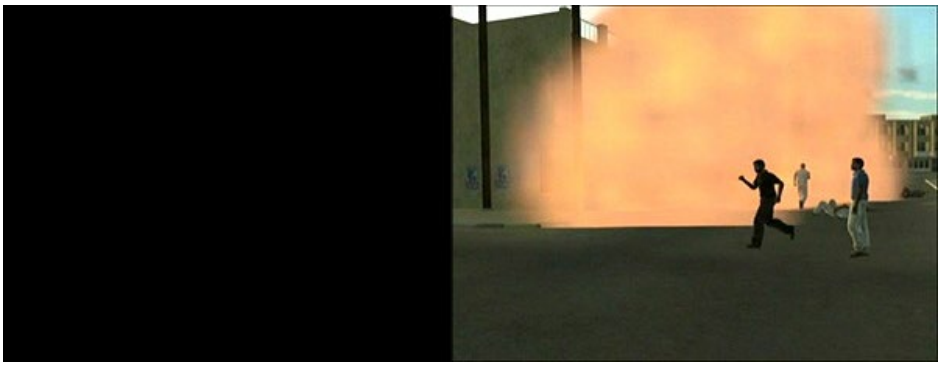
> "It's a very collaborative relationship. I know which stimuli I'm going to add as the therapy progresses. ... I say, 'I think you're ready for the I.E.D. blast or for more airplanes.'"[37]

Consequently, the simulated real is continually mediated and improvised, interactively entwined in a dynamic relationship with the veteran's phenomenological reactions and the therapist's contemporaneous decisions.



Another soldier trying out Virtual Iraq in *Immersion*

Yet, throughout his *Serious Games* series, Farocki makes it clear that Virtual Iraq only simulates an incomplete, biased, and ideologically driven version of reality. Most notably, he draws attention to the extremely marginal roles of Iraqis in the technology and their use as props for U.S. objectives. This major lacuna becomes visualized in the opening and closing moments of *Immersion*, which features the same sequence of virtual reality footage. In both iterations, the simulation of virtual Iraqis walking around a neighborhood is displayed on the left-hand side of the screen with no physical counterpart on the right. Without a subject guiding the scene, viewers are given no sense of who is controlling this world. Then a bomb suddenly explodes and the local civilians flee in horror, screaming but not otherwise speaking.

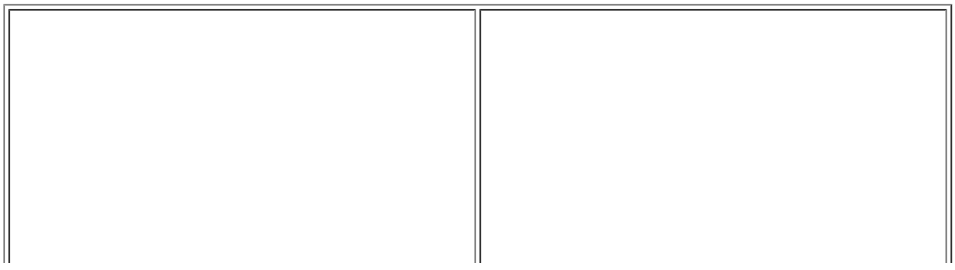


The virtual explosion upending virtual Iraqi lives

As Kodwo Eshun states,

> "Every pixel celebrates its industrial might. ... So of course you would have Virtual Reality Exposure Therapy for soldiers, rather than for Iraqi civilians. The soldiers who carry out the 'shock and awe' are the people who are repaired, in order that they can go out and do more shocking and more awesome damage."[38]

While the treatment of U.S. veterans' traumas is the focal point for the technology, Iraqis' traumas pointedly do not factor into the design. In the program, Iraqis only appear virtually as potential victims or enemies and the subjectivity that activates the technological interface is always an U.S. soldier.



	
The Iraqi as extra in a Virtual Iraq village	The Iraqi as rooftop attacker
	
The Iraqi as violent insurgent	The Iraqi as captive and killed enemy

The marginalization of simulated Iraqis relates to misconceptions of what 'real' PTSD looks like. Angela M. Carter has critiqued the

> "pervasiveness of the white, hetero-masculine soldier as the dominant image of PTSD in our national imaginary"[39]

This characterization is one that aptly describes Kevin in *Immersion*. Carter further writes:

> "[F]or someone to overcome the shattering affects of trauma and regain a stable, coherent understanding of themselves ... they must have had some conception of stability to begin with. For those of us whose entire lives have been lived in traumatizing environments, there can be no post-trauma because there was never a pre-trauma."[40]

Therefore, while studies demonstrate that those most prone to experiencing traumatic events in both times of war and peace are minority groups, the poor, and the disenfranchised,[41] the system designers may unconsciously consider Iraqis unfixable and incoherent with no singular traumatic event to identify. Therefore, the PTSD of Iraqi civilians and soldiers is not 'real' enough to be meaningfully simulated.

Immersion registers another telling critique through its relation to *A Sun With No Shadow*, the next and final installment of *Serious Games*. In the latter film, Farocki juxtaposes the use of Virtual Iraq as a therapeutic device for veterans and the use of *Virtual Battlespace 2* to train soldiers for combat. By comparing the training and therapy interfaces, he reveals a key difference between the media. Namely, the virtual sun in *VBS2* casts shadows that accurately reflect the position of the Middle Eastern sun, while the sun in Virtual Iraq casts no shadows. To emphasize the discrepancy in the military's economic priorities, Farocki positions the two visuals side-by-side in a split-screen. An intertitle then states,

> "The system for remembering is a little cheaper than the one for

training."[42]



Showing the difference between the training (left) and treatment (right) systems in *A Sun With No Shadow*



An intertitle calls attention to the difference in the systems.

This inconsistency in verisimilitude bestows the virtual reality footage in *Immersion* a retroactive surreality, suggesting that its technical shortcomings reflect an institutional negligence. Highlighting that lack of attention to realistic details also invites viewers to ask what other oversights veterans must contend with.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of *VBS2* and Virtual Iraq highlights how irrevocably entwined the real and the simulated have become throughout all stages of contemporary warfare. In his discussion of the Persian Gulf War, Paul Patton diagnosed this shift toward dehumanized warfare that new military technologies have only exacerbated. Patton's introduction to Jean Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* states::

> "Technological simulacra neither displace nor deter the violent reality of war, they have become an integral part of its operational procedures. Virtual environments are now incorporated into operational warplanes, filtering the real scene and presenting aircrew with a more readable world. The development of flight simulators provided an early example of the computer technology which allowed the boundaries between simulation and reality to become blurred: the images and information which furnish the material for exercises and war games become indistinguishable from what would be encountered in a real conflict"[43]

In his own theorization, Baudrillard argued that the conditions of late capitalism had produced the age of the hyperreal, in which the real and the representation had become indistinguishable.[43] He identified commercial media like film and television as key instruments of the hyperreal, because they degraded the boundaries between the real and the representative.[44] Regarding the Gulf War, Baudrillard built on these ideas to assert that the conflict was a "[p]romotional,

speculative, virtual" simulation of war rather than one that fit the legal and political criteria of a real war fought for its own ends.[45] Though some critics criticized his deliberately provocative and contrarian stance,[46] he, along with Paul Virilio, influentially elucidated the televisual spectacularization of warfare that heavily shaped public opinion during both Iraq Wars. His recognition that the "profound indeterminacy of this war stems from the fact of its being both terminated in advance and interminable"[47] also arguably presaged the even more nebulous and ever-shifting boundaries that have characterized the ongoing War on Terror.

Farocki's lifetime of work suggests that he aligned with but stopped short of fully embracing Baudrillard's critiques. Like Baudrillard, Farocki demonstrated an acute concern for the blurring of the real and representative, and maintained a comparable skepticism toward the ideological machinations and formal manipulations of mass media throughout his career. Tellingly, his cynicism toward the rhetoric and technological flashiness of Virtual Iraq reflected a sustained wariness of war and surveillance technologies. Yet, as Thomas Elsaesser has observed, one important distinction is that Baudrillard upheld a visible reality and a simulated version of that reality, while Farocki was more attuned to the limits of visibility, scale, and intelligibility that render the conditions of reality difficult to index and represent.[48] Farocki's decision to become an artist and documentarian also reaffirmed his belief in the potential—and indeed, the dire need—for a resurgence of critical media theory and praxis that endeavors, against these considerable odds, to stage meaningful interventions in public and political life. Thus, he upheld the conviction that some modes of media can still offer ways to puncture the condition of hyperreality. They can still creatively reveal the otherwise invisible and unintelligible and revitalize meaningful engagements with reality.

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Documentary realism



Documentarians have always taken creative liberties, including Flaherty in *Nanook of the North* (1922).

By waiting to reveal the true nature of Kevin's and Barbara's interaction, Farocki was simultaneously challenging established documentary conventions and reflexively noting the genre's inherent but not always acknowledged manipulations. Though viewers may assume that documentary has a stronger truth claim than fiction films and provides a more direct vantage onto reality, the "creative treatment of actuality," as John Grierson famously defined the genre, [49][open notes in new window] can lead to techniques that unintentionally or deliberately distort the parameters of actuality and invention. Bill Nichols has extrapolated on this complicatedly ambiguous relationship, writing:

> "Documentary is a fiction unlike any other precisely because the images direct us toward the historical world, but ... we are left to determine if the sounds and images we attend to also occurred in or outside of social history, within the web of fabrications needed to construct the time and space of a story of within the folds of a larger history. No guarantees exist."[50]

This indeterminate capacity to bend the truth can be located in the documentary genre's incipient stages. In his 1922 silent film *Nanook of the North*, Robert Flaherty used reenactments and altered key facts, including the protagonist's name and the identity of the protagonist's wife.[51]

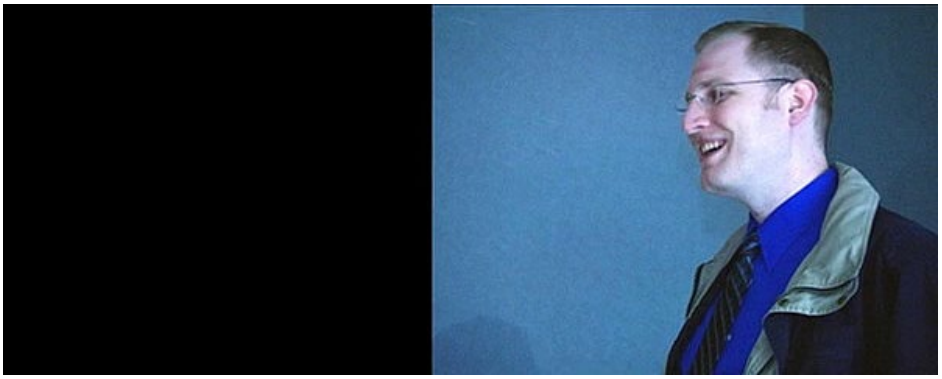
Though Farocki's choice to use role-play (a significant form of reenactment) was partially motivated by the demands of ethical human subject research and the military's stipulation that he could not film real veterans, he has also incorporated this technique in his documentary work since the 1980s.[52] For him, it provided a form of representation that an observational documentary mode like direct cinema could not achieve. Farocki said,

> "If you're a documentarist, you know how unstructured life is and how people are talking when they're not scripted, but if they have a role-play, there's already some... structure and even a wonderful artificiality in the things you are recording."[53]

Paradoxically, despite the artificiality that Farocki sought to capture in his work, the role-play technique can also persuade documentary viewers to believe more firmly in the veracity of Kevin's account. As Farocki noted,

> "He played his role so convincingly that friends and colleagues whom I had told we were filming role-play assumed that he was recounting an actual, genuine memory."[54]

In this sense, performing the 'real' can create a credible documentary realism that is difficult to distinguish from a *cinéma vérité* realism.



A smiling Kevin after his performance as a traumatized soldier



Barbara addressing the unseen audience after the demonstration

Furthermore, Farocki's manipulation of documentary convention could prompt viewers to recall the relentless distortions of truth and fiction throughout the build-up to, fighting of, and aftermath of the second Iraq War. It recasts notorious historical moments performances designed to deceive multiple levels of local, national, and global audiences. This includes:

- George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Condoleeza Rice insisting on the presence on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq,
- Colin Powell testifying at the United Nations,
- supposedly joyous Iraqis 'spontaneously' tearing down the Saddam Hussein statue in Firdos Square,
- the bombastic pronouncements of Bush's Mission Accomplished speech.

At the same time, this manipulation of truth/fiction also recalls the falsified and incorrectly interpreted military intelligence reports that the war was predicated on and the complicity of the mainstream news media that uncritically disseminated such false, government-supplied information by masquerading it as objective journalism. Like documentary, Farocki thus implied, corporate war journalism is also a fiction unlike any other. Though it maintains ties to the historical world, it nonetheless only provides a limited, arranged, and deliberately or unintentionally skewed version of reality.

Additionally, in contrast to the predominant mode of ground-level *cinema vérité* that typifies Iraq War documentaries, *Immersion* compels its viewers to view the war from an unexpected yet more representative perspective. Calvin Fagan has argued that the embedded-with-the-troops proximity that *vérité* documentaries like *Gunner Palace* (dir. Michael Tucker, 2004) and *The War Tapes* (dir. Deborah Scranton, 2006) offers is inadvertently myopic. He has observed that these films

> "maintain individual interaction as the locus of warfare, and thus serve to authenticate the embodied reality of contemporary wars despite the



On the ground with troops in *The War Tapes*

> countervailing tendencies toward virtualization and disembodiment."[55]

Therefore, as the modalities of warfare shift and increasingly incorporate technologies like virtual reality, cyberweapons, dataveillance, and drones, documentarians must also vigilantly adapt the tools and techniques they use to document and divulge these updated realities in response.

Brechtian realism

Throughout his artistic career, Harun Farocki endeavored to make viewers of his films reexamine institutional values, connect a diverse set of hegemonic social infrastructures and systems, and critically interrogate the truth status of media texts by documenting sites of media production. In a description that aptly fits the *Serious Games* series, Chris Pavsek has noted,

> "Each of Farocki's observational films in some way engage in a pedagogy of denaturalisation or de-reification: processes that we assume to be natural or (in Lukács' notion) 'second nature' are revealed to be the product of an intense educational process and training, matters less of instinct than of ingrained habit and ideological indoctrination."[56]

Ken Johnson has also argued that Farocki

> "invites scepticism about the representation of reality in general. His art is a meditation on the degree to which our world, what we take for reality, is formed by recording and image-making machinery."[57]

Thus, by denaturalizing the apparently natural, *Immersion* reflexively builds on the aforementioned realisms and challenges viewers through a dynamic version of Marxist realism.

Farocki's approach reflected the major influence of Marxist realist Bertolt Brecht.[58] In his own writing, Brecht dismissed the rigid standards of realism that fellow Marxist Georgs Lukács espoused could only apply to the bourgeois novel. He countered that this form was itself the product of a particular historical moment and constrained artists' creativity.[59] Instead, Brecht advocated for a more dynamic, populist, and updated conception of realism that was "wide and political, sovereign over all conventions."[60] Though Brecht, like Lukács, defined realism as a mode dedicated to "discovering the causal complexes of society" and "unmasking the prevailing view of things as those who are in power," he also encouraged artists to use their imaginations, humor, and originality.[61] In their quest to produce new kinds of realistic expression, he also recommended the incorporation of unforeseen complications, irregularities, and twists.[62]

Tellingly, Farocki, who employed radical forms and unpredictable techniques throughout his oeuvre, repeatedly described *Immersion* as a "Brechtian" work.[73] He also likened Kevin's head-mounted display to masks worn by the Chinese actors that informed Brecht's approach to theater.[64] Akin to the 'alienation

effect' that this East Asian style of acting can galvanize, the disconcerting sight of Kevin wearing the cyborg-like equipment is intended to defamiliarize viewers and their current conceptions of reality.



The head-mounted display as Brechtian mask

Yet, the clearest connection to Brecht is the concluding revelation that Kevin is a military psychologist. A response to Brecht's call for twists, this distanciating move ruptures the assumed reality to nudge viewers to notice the broader social and economic logics at play. Namely, it transmutes Kevin's identity from a traumatized veteran to a man who is performing a fictional trauma in order to promote Virtual Iraq to the military. Rather than a fraught therapy session, Kevin and Barbara's exchange also transforms into a calculated sales pitch much like Skip Rizzo's preceding demonstration. Their success depends on the wide adoption of this product, even while its implementation may facilitate the waging of future wars and render these conflicts even more asymmetrical. In a sense then, by selling the war technology, they are making war itself easier to sell. This covert approbation of war through the celebration of its high-tech innovations occurs more overtly (albeit sometimes mitigated by the representations of ethical, legal, and technological dilemmas) in many U.S.-focused war films such as *Eye in the Sky* (dir. Gavin Hood, 2016), *Zero Dark Thirty* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, 2012), *Black Hawk Down* (dir. Ridley Scott, 2001), *Top Gun* (dir. Tony Scott, 1986), and *Victory Through Air Power* (dir. James Algar et al., 1943).



Military aerial technology as co-star in *Top Gun*…



… and in *Black Hawk Down*…

As the closing credits further confirm (but do not fully explain), Kevin Holloway, Barbara Rothbaum, and Skip Rizzo are all psychologists and academics that work for or collaborate with the military. The demonstrations they are enacting in *Immersion* are for the benefit of a group of U.S. Air Force psychologists at Fort Lewis' Madigan Army Medical Center in Tacoma, Washington (now known as the Joint Base Lewis-McChord). Like the development of Virtual Iraq, the military has sponsored the research that Holloway, Rothbaum, Rizzo, and others have conducted on VRET. Though such junctures between the academic and military have long been routinized, other instantiations signal the potential risks of this partnership. For instance, in the 1970s, it was the Office of Naval Research that sponsored Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo's infamous and ethically unsound prison experiment,[65] as well as his and Gregory L. White's research into the 'chilling effects' that surveillance produces on monitored subjects.[66] In 2015, a coalition of health professionals and human rights activists also disclosed that the American Psychological Association had secretly collaborated with the Bush administration to participate in interrogations and provide a medical justification to the government's extralegal torture program.[67]

Viewers intrigued enough by *Immersion*'s revelations to investigate further will also discover that the ICT, where Rizzo works, is a Department of Defense-sponsored "University Affiliated Research Center (UARC) working in collaboration with the U.S. Army Research Laboratory."[68] In 1999, it received $5 million annually in military funding, but as of 2010, the funding had increased



… and in the Disney-produced *Victory Through Air Power*



The Institute of Creative Technologies building in Los Angeles[76]



Skip Rizzo presenting at USC

to $30 million.[69] A contract extension in 2011 provided an additional $135 million for three years of research on and development of interactive training media for the Army.[70] The ICT website further boasts that its location "in Los Angeles facilitates collaboration with major movie and game makers" and that ICT concurrently helps "create realistic computer-generated characters in Hollywood blockbusters" and virtual technologies for the military.[71] Through this rhetoric, the institute promotes its amalgamation of academic, entertainment, and military partnerships as a lucrative opportunity rather than a conflict of interest. Rizzo has stated the terms of the arrangement more sardonically, referring to the institute as "the unholy marriage of Hollywood, the military, and academia."[72]

Such thorny intersections point more broadly to the state-corporate linkages that James Der Derian refers to as the 'military-industrial-media-entertainment network' (MIME-NET)[73] and Tim Lenoir calls the 'military-entertainment complex.'[74] Lenoir has drawn links between official organizations like the U.S. Army's Simulation Training and Instrumentation Command (STRICOM, but since renamed the Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training, & Instrumentation, or PEO STRI) and the videogame industry.[75] His analysis shows how these groups have increasingly intertwined their technological and economic resources in ways that benefit both groups but are rarely transparent to the public.

One conspicuous example of the eroding boundaries between state and commercial initiatives is the U.S. Army's development of *America's Army*. A multiplayer first-person shooter (FPS) videogame, *America's Army* mimetically simulates U.S. warfare and integrates real weapons and information from real training courses to act as a military recruiting tool.[76] After the game's launch in 2002, players downloaded it from the U.S. Army's recruiting website more than 2.5 million times and by 2013, the game had registered over 11 million users.[77] Commercial versions were also available for the Xbox and Xbox 360, and as mobile and arcade applications.[78] One of the Army's major advertising agencies, Leo Burnett, credited the game with creating more positive public impressions of the U.S. military and catalyzing a spike in recruitment efforts that exceeded all other forms of advertising combined.[79] Perhaps predictably, given its enormous popularity with soldiers, developers have since reconfigured the game into an actual training tool of the military that offers dozens of applications.[80] [81]

More recently, military recruitment centers in shopping malls have also incorporated computers and videogame stations with military-themed games to entice younger generations of citizens to enlist.[82] This strategy aims to recast war as cutting-edge and interactive entertainment, while conveniently overlooking the ethical quandaries of killing and the less glamorous and sometimes abusive realities of military service.[83] In the words of Casey Wardynski, a Lieutenant Colonel and the primary creator of *America's Army*, videogames represent an ideal way "to capture youth mind-share" and to impress the twelve- and thirteen-year-old boys who have not yet decided what to do with their lives.[84] According to Wardynski,

> "You have to get to them before they've made those decisions [about school and employment.]"[85]



Battle maneuver from the highly successful game *America's Army*



Battle maneuver from the most recent sequel, *America's Army: Proving Grounds*



A *Call of Duty* Xbox tournament in a newly opened Army Warrior Zone in Vilsack, Germany[94]

To replace shuttering movie theaters on bases, the Army is also heavily investing in "high-tech concept" entertainment centers called Warrior Zones to entertain soldiers. One Army Major General described these base facilities as places where soldiers can

> "focus on developing strong friendships that enhance a troop's ability to maximize [his or her] potential and deal with the stresses of war."[86]

Located at the Joint Base Lewis-McChord (where *Immersion* was also filmed), the first Warrior Zone cost $11 million and featured

> "16 game stations with 55-inch high-definition monitors for Xbox and PS3 video games, computers with high-speed Internet access, more than 50 high-definition 52-inch televisions equipped with DirecTV, and 32 Alienware custom gaming computers."[87]

Typically, Warrior Zones are also equipped with war simulation videogames such as *Call of Duty*, *World of Warcraft*, *Army of Two*, and *America's Army*.[88] Thus, soldiers who are in training or on active duty can simulate warfare in ways that appear recreational, but are intimately connected to the enactment and perpetuation of real warfare.[89]

By obliquely gesturing toward such multifaceted economic and industrial logistics, *Immersion* positions Virtual Iraq firmly within the MIME-NET system. Indeed, Rizzo and Pair not only adapted Virtual Iraq from the commercial game *Full Spectrum Warrior*, but *Full Spectrum Warrior* was itself developed by ICT and Pandemic Studios and based on a combat simulator that ICT had developed for the Department of Defense. Thus, from recruitment to training to operations to treatment, the military technologies derived from the entwinements of state-corporate partnerships are significantly mediating the perpetration and experiences of contemporary warfare.

Conclusion

Given Brecht's commitment to a realism capable of "discovering the causal complexes of society,"[93] it is fitting that each of *Immersion*'s multiple realisms enhance Farocki's overarching Brechtian critique of the MIME-NET. For instance, the need to convey the phenomenological realism of PTSD speaks to the negligible coverage of the disorder in the mass media and the formal and unofficial alliances of corporate news media and the state that diminish journalists' critical capacities. Relatedly, the military's prohibition on including real veterans in the film shows not only an ethical desire to safeguard traumatized soldiers' confidentiality, but an attempt to change the narrative by promoting instead a state-of-the-art technological solution instead. In addition, the selective lacunae and partialities that occur at the design level of Virtual Iraq's simulated realism such as the marginality of Iraqis and the exclusively U.S. subjectivity make sense when thinking of Virtual Iraq as a commodity funded by and designed expressly for the U.S. military.

Therefore, as Farocki's Brechtian techniques avow, the military is strategically instrumentalizing a range of media infrastructures and technologies to simulate biased realities and to naturalize global conflicts for both soldiers and citizens. However, as *Immersion* defiantly and ultimately asserts, critical alternative media production can also be a tool to expose these tactics. It can advocate for a truer, more perceptive realism honed by the techniques of distanciation, skepticism, and defamiliarization. It can still raise questions and objections, although it must be more creative than ever to disarm the dominant narratives that aggressively glorify war and its technological marvels.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Extensions of the avant-garde: David Gatten's *Secret History of the Dividing Line*

by Patrick Faubert

Contemporary avant-garde art presents a paradox. For decades now, scholars have declared the end of the avant-garde, arguing the movement has been lost to an irreversible crisis that has stripped away the force of its aesthetic and ideological program, and silenced any resonance on which contemporary artists might draw. Yet, many artists, as well as critics, continue to engage the avant-garde as a meaningful artistic practice, finding in its push for the continued progression of art a means of negotiating their own practices. If the movement remains vibrant among artists then, then, how are we to understand well theorized arguments proclaiming the avant-garde's death? Indeed, if our postmodern moment has rendered the anti-traditional aesthetics of the avant-garde, which form its critical ethos, as merely another artistic style, is it possible for the avant-garde to hold any weight as a continuing cultural movement? And if artists embed their work within the ethos of the avant-garde, can they hope to solicit the forms of aesthetic and political intervention held paramount by that movement? Such questions are, of course, limited. The term avant-garde is now widely used without recourse to its historical meaning, and many artists and critics identify work as avant-garde as a straightforward means of citing innovation and progression rather than a political ideal. But these questions remain valid both because the term avant-garde continues to carry aesthetic and political designations, and because the value of the avant-garde, its history, and continued influence, are still being worked out.

To assess the extensions of the avant-garde into contemporary art is an undertaking too broad for this essay, and one already undertaken by other scholars. My modest focus here is the possible relationship between the historical avant-garde, its death, and North American avant-garde cinema, a significant movement in filmmaking that has been developing in scope and size for nearly a century.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Of course, to speak of this cinema as "avant-garde" already risks a loose employment of the term. Avant-garde cinema is broad and encompasses numerous types of filmmaking. Its filmmakers also often identify with genres and artistic programs (e.g. structural film) that more precisely describe their work than does the broad heading "avant-garde." But the breadth of this cinema notwithstanding, it remains possible, and reasonable, to locate within a large number of its works a set of frequently emerging ambitions. These include an interest in pushing beyond traditional forms of filmmaking, developing new and relevant forms of cinematic communication, and liberating cinema from deterministic forms of mainstream entertainment. Such ambitions share much in common with the historical avant-garde, especially an impulse to reject notions of artistic tradition and to seek aesthetic programs capable of

initiating artistic and social change. But in light of the fate of the avant-garde, any intersection between this cinema and the historical movement is undermined by questions over the continued efficacy of avant-garde art. That is, if the avant-garde is dead, what value might there be in filmmakers and critics seeking to recuperate its critical practice?

This question is brought to the fore in an ongoing series of films, titled *Secret History of the Dividing Line, A True Account in Nine Parts*, by the U.S. filmmaker David Gatten. This series focuses on events in the life of William Byrd II of Westover, Virginia, a lesser known figure in U.S. colonial history but one who played an important role in both the settlement of Virginia and in the formation of the Library of Congress. In different ways, the films in this series investigate the intersections between Byrd's life and larger histories of the United States, as well larger processes of writing and disseminating historical knowledge. Scott MacDonald, who has written extensively on avant-garde and experimental cinema, refers to these films as complex reflections on the production of historical knowledge and on the cultures who produce it.[2] These films are doubly interesting, as MacDonald also notes, for how they reflect on the aesthetics of avant-garde cinema and use their formal construction to allude to the capacities of avant-garde film to engage with issues of history.[3]

To my knowledge, Gatten has not expressed an explicit intention to connect his film to the historical avant-garde. It is also not my intention to propose this as an explicit critical strategy in his filmmaking practice. Yet, through their formal investigations of historical inquiry, I would argue the *Secret History* films can be read as a pointed response to the continued potential of a critical practice explored by the avant-garde over the past two centuries. In particular, the manner in which these films visibly intertwine aesthetics and processes of historical understanding connects them to the interest of the avant-garde in critiquing history as a means of further critiquing social organization. Fiercely anti-historical, the avant-garde also has envisioned itself as anti-traditional, invested in an aesthetic program it hoped would destroy the influence of the past and usher in a new, ideal society. But this striving for destruction and rejuvenation is an area in which the avant-garde was effectively silenced by changing understandings of artistic tradition and history by the latter decades of the twentieth century. In the wake of this silencing, the *Secret History* films take up the impulse of that movement to resist history. Importantly, however, these films open that impulse to new and contemporary contexts, seeking not resuscitate history but pointing to a path on which it might find the means to continue to develop and flourish.

My focus here is on this process' manifestation in one film, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (2002), which focuses on William Byrd II's involvement in an eighteenth-century, government-sanctioned survey-expedition to establish the border between Virginia and North Carolina. More specifically, this film deals with Byrd's two accounts of that expedition: his official account, *The Official History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*,and his satiric personal account, *Secret History of the Line*.[4] Through the use of several unconventional formal devices—tearing of the film, optical printing, and making visible processes of editing—the film invests these accounts in a larger narrative of the settlement of the United States. In doing so, it manipulates them to reveal their inconsistencies and to elicit a reading of them that undermines that larger narrative. In this way, the film also shifts its focus from history, broadly conceived, to historiography, the writing of history, and within that shift Gatten reveals a potential reconfiguration of the anti-historical program of the avant-garde. Indeed, in using formal devices and historical accounts to critique history, he evokes the program of the avant-garde, both illustrating its distance from that movement, while implicitly evoking its continued relevance to contemporary artistic production.

What follows here is my reading of *Secret History of the Dividing Line* as a negotiation of the continued influence of the avant-garde on contemporary artistic production. My analysis is limited to one central concern of the avant-garde, and is not meant to limit how we should read that movement or Gatten's film. I therefore proceed in two parts. First, I examine an ideological underpinning of the avant-garde, its manifestation as an aesthetic strategy, and the reasons it has been deemed lost to history. Second, I offer a close reading of *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, suggesting how the film can be read as engaging this underpinning and its aesthetic manifestation, as well as an exercise in working through its crisis.

The historical avant-garde

It is difficult to offer a precise history or definition of the avant-garde. The term itself has origins in political thought, and has been applied within the arts since the early nineteenth century, intended to identify art that was, as Richard Schechner states, both "new and opposed to prevailing values."[5] The term "avant-garde" since then, particularly following its crystallization as an ideological force in the late nineteenth century, has been used to speak a range of artistic schools and styles (Futurism, dada, surrealism, etc.). As a result, to identify for the avant-garde a strict set of subjects and techniques, a framework through which all of its applications can be accounted for, is to risk an ahistorical definition, to risk ignoring the historical relativism of the those various schools and styles, and to miss the rich contradictions and nuances that they each add to how we understand the avant-garde in general. In the more precise context of North American filmmaking, to speak of the avant-garde raises additional difficulties—for the application of the term ranges from designating forms of cinematic modernism and political subversion, to a functioning as a loosely employed synonym for the broad category "experimental" cinema.

Here I do not wish to outline the history of the avant-garde but rather to explore its continued presence in artistic production. I am less concerned with slippage in the application of the term than with its critical ethos. Speaking to problems inherent in defining the term, Paul Mann reminds us that definition is often a means of generating allies, an observance that extends to the classification of various artistic practices as avant-garde.[6] Indeed, though the application of the term does not reveal a singular program to which artists adhere, it does designate a set of concerns informing, and to an extent integrating, the output of various literary and artistic schools. Therefore, while a singular history of the avant-garde remains problematic, the continued application of the term exposes the possibility of reading a mutual critical and aesthetic approach underlying many formations of the avant-garde as a broad movement in the arts.

What is of interest here is a particular aspect of that approach: the notion that a rejection of tradition, and subsequently of history, leads to social progress.[7] That the avant-garde would be opposed to history and tradition is unsurprising given its close affinity to and inversion of modernism. Whereas modernism connected aesthetic innovation with a sense of progress and historical awareness, the avant-garde strove for an aesthetic program that was fiercely anti-historical and anti-traditional. This strategy most likely owes to the emergence of the avant-garde in political thought. Andreas Huyssen, reflecting on the development of the avant-garde, notes that by the early nineteenth century, following the theorizing of the avant-garde by French philosopher Henri de Saint-Simon, the artistic avant-garde had been inextricably bound with the notion of social progress.[8] As it developed through the nineteenth century, the artistic avant-garde was subsequently influenced by contemporaneous cultural movements of Anarchism and Marxism, and crystallized as a political, anti-traditional, and anti-elitist movement, positioned in sharp opposition to the established state.[9] Though different artists would give such opposition different forms and targets, a broad

focus would emerge across the avant-garde in the form of an assault on tradition. In his key definition of the avant-garde in 1939, Clement Greenberg insists that the movement was made possible only by the perception that our social order is historically structured.[10] The avant-garde further takes aim at that structure and order by seeking to destroy its legitimacy and influence; the destruction of the past is meant to pave the way for the future.

The artistic manifestation of this revolt against history is the aesthetic extremism for which the avant-garde is widely known, an extremism, taken up in many forms, that was intended explicitly to stand in marked contrast to established traditions.[11] In his 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger provides a framework to read this aesthetic strategy as a form of activism. In his largely Marxist analysis of the avant-garde, Bürger reads the art as a social system embedded within the ideological superstructures of bourgeois culture. Artistic tradition is therefore the manifestation of specific ideological values. As a result, attacking artistic tradition by undermining or overthrowing its aesthetic strategies offers to undermine those same superstructures.[12] In this political reading, the avant-garde's resistance of traditional aesthetics, and its free synthesizing of the aesthetic means of diverse, historical artistic practices, reveals that the aesthetic means of art are developed as rational choices aimed at producing specific effects, and not by a necessary adherence of art to historical traditions of mimetic representation.[13] For Bürger, this revelation initiates a criticism of bourgeois society, undermining the legitimacy of history in art as a precursor to undermining the legitimacy of history as a structuring agent of present social organization overall. Bürger's analysis, much richer than I here allude to, might not account for all instances of avant-garde art, but its connection of art and aesthetics to political subversion establishes a link between aesthetics, an anti-historical sensibility, and the political potential of art works. Indeed, Bürger offers an explanation of the frequently cited anti-traditional thrust of the movement, and one that connects avant-garde both to desire for revolution that is both artistic and social.

This desire, which finds itself at the center of the critical and aesthetic project of the avant-garde, also finds itself at the center of the crisis faced by that movement in the latter half of the twentieth century. It was, paradoxically, the wide-spread recognition and celebration of the avant-garde in the twentieth century came to undermine its authority—a fate shared by many schools of subversive art. In 1964, literary critic Leslie Fiedler publically declared the death of avant-garde literature because he felt the avant-garde's oppositional stance had been coopted by the traditions and society it sought to overturn, and was thus stripped of its potency.[14] The avant-garde's anti-traditional stance is predicated on the movement's position at the margins of the society it opposes, its incorporation into that society and traditions undermines its project.[15] Greenberg had foreseen the end of the avant-garde in 1939, suggesting that even by the time of his definition its success, both critical and financial, was dependent on the institution of art to which it was opposed, a contradiction that would inevitably cause it to lose traction, legitimating and strengthening the historical tradition whose authority it purports to undermine.[16] Indeed, the acceptance of the avant-garde, in the twentieth century, into the broad cannon of Western art ultimately negates the historical project identified by scholars such as Bürger, stripping it of its anti-traditional ethos, and degrading the political thrust of its aesthetic strategies.[17]

If this cooption of the avant-garde by its opposition has thrown its political project into crisis, that crisis has been deepened by the simultaneous emergence of postmodernism in the second half of the twentieth century. Debates over what constitutes postmodernism notwithstanding, a particular theorizing of the this broad cultural movement reveals in greater light the crisis of the avant-garde. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard

proposes that postmodernism marks the end of "grand narratives" (*grands récits*) of history, narratives of historical understanding through which societies identify and legitimize themselves, their growth and their progress.[18] The notion of the end of such broad forms of cultural understanding connects with claims that postmodernism offers a new cultural experience that is fragmented, temporary, and frequently difficult to pin down.

Lyotard's claim is nearly forty years old, but it raises the provocative notion that a byproduct of this disappearance of such grand narratives as forms of social understanding is the lack of an overarching concept of history as agent of social formation. In such an environment, the avant-garde's opposition to history cannot be brought into sharp relief for its audiences. The conception of history as broad and discernible force, central to critical practice of the avant-garde, is precisely what is absent in Lyotard's theorizing of postmodernism. Further, the notion of an anti-traditional aesthetic program holds little value if the weight of tradition and history are themselves absent, already in question, or without acknowledgment. Literary scholar Matei Calinescu suggests the "silencing" of the avant-garde by postmodernism to stem from the incongruity of its "furiously anti-traditional" posture within a cultural movement more than willing to "revisit the past."[19] Such willingness to revisit the past is both evidence of changing conceptions of history in postmodernism, as well as its dismantling of the distinctions between cultural spheres, e.g., high-culture, mass culture, a dismantling that itself blurs the trajectory and historical thrust of artistic traditions. Indeed, if postmodernism both expands the legitimacy and strips away the historical understanding and aesthetic forms, then it leaves the avant-garde without a target for its polemic, and without a framework through which to assert it.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

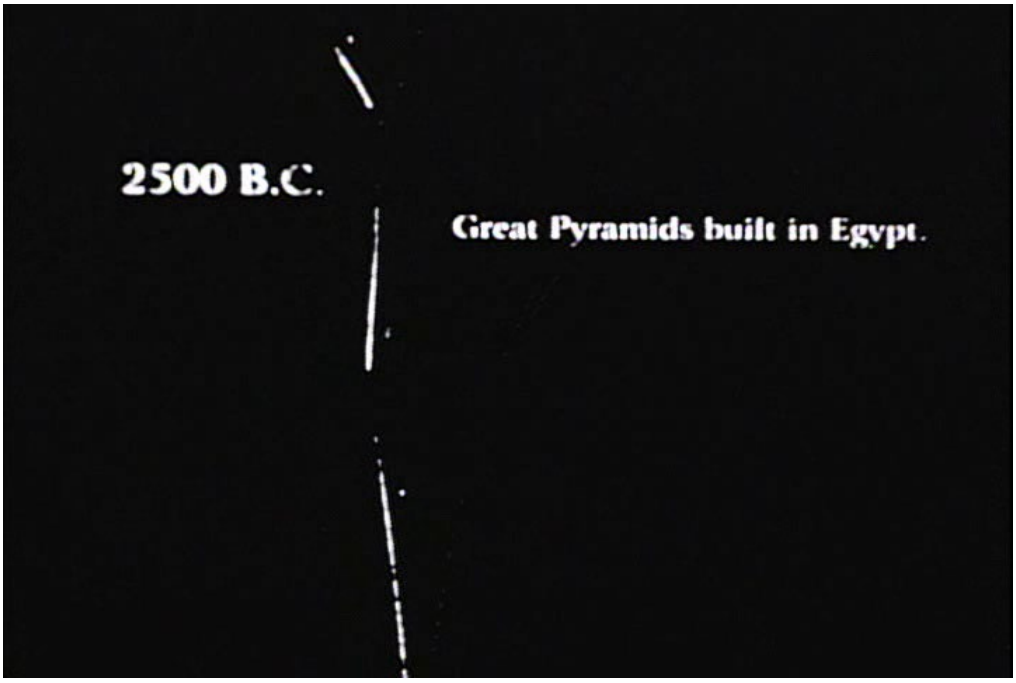
Secret History of the Dividing Line

The relationship between the critical practice of the avant-garde and David Gatten's *Secret History* films is not immediately apparent. Indeed, Gatten identifies his artistic practice as "making moving images," and even the scholar must infer their investment in the historical development and crisis of the avant-garde briefly outlined above. I have, of course, raised this discussion of the avant-garde in the context of Gatten's film *Secret History of the Dividing Line* because I believe the film explores the continued presence and potential of the critical practice of the avant-garde, and points to an innovative manner in which its crisis might be negotiated by contemporary filmmakers or artists interested in taking up its aims.

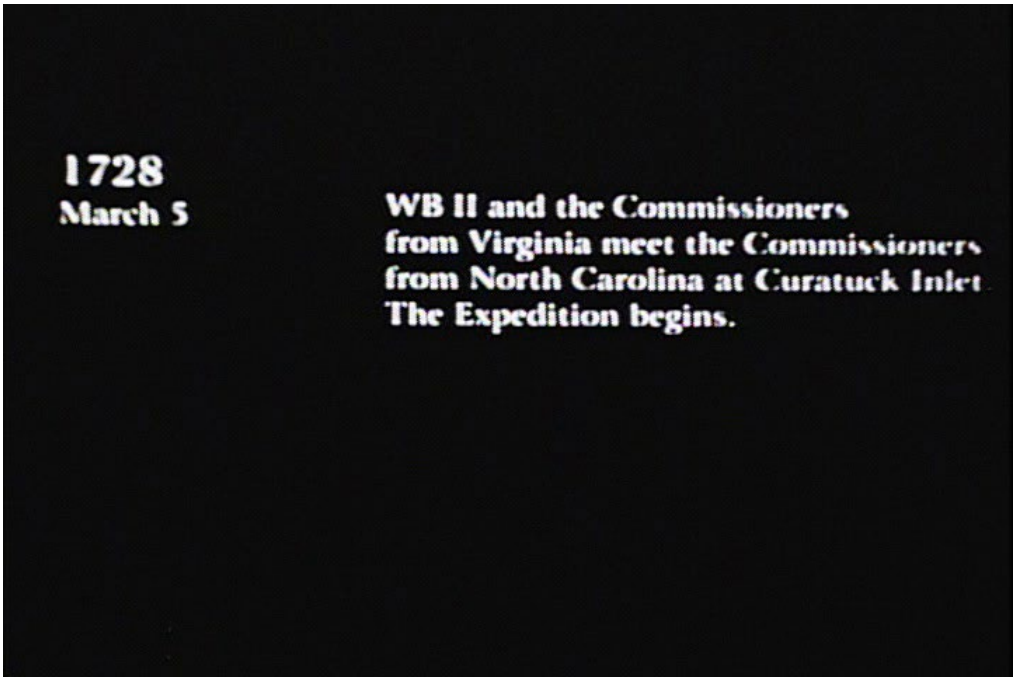
Twenty minutes long, silent, and filmed in black-and-white, *Secret History of the Dividing Line* revolves around two central concerns of the avant-garde: history and aesthetics. Specifically, the film deals with two historical accounts of a particular event, and uses formal devices to manipulate those accounts and encourage particular readings of them.[21] [open notes in new window] The film opens with a short sequence of unexposed film through which a vertical tear, resembling a deep scratch, runs erratically, splitting the predominantly black screen at the middle.

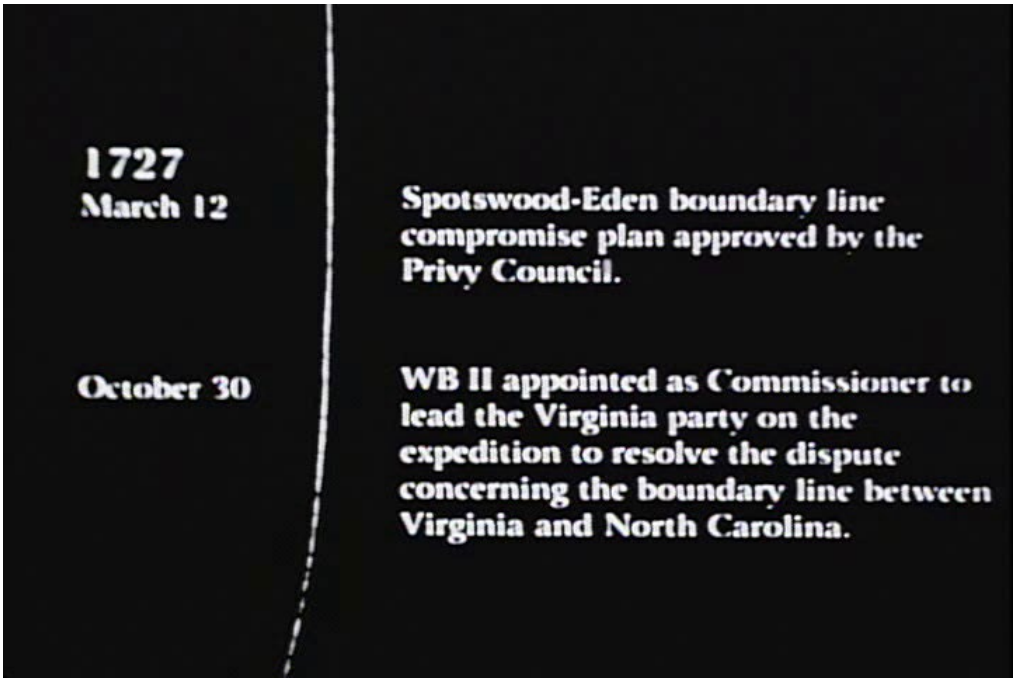


After several seconds of this black screen, and over the continued vertical tear, the film presents a series of dates that mark, at least those one is able to grasp, the development of civilization (predominantly Western civilization), from 15 000 BC up to the first half of the twentieth century.

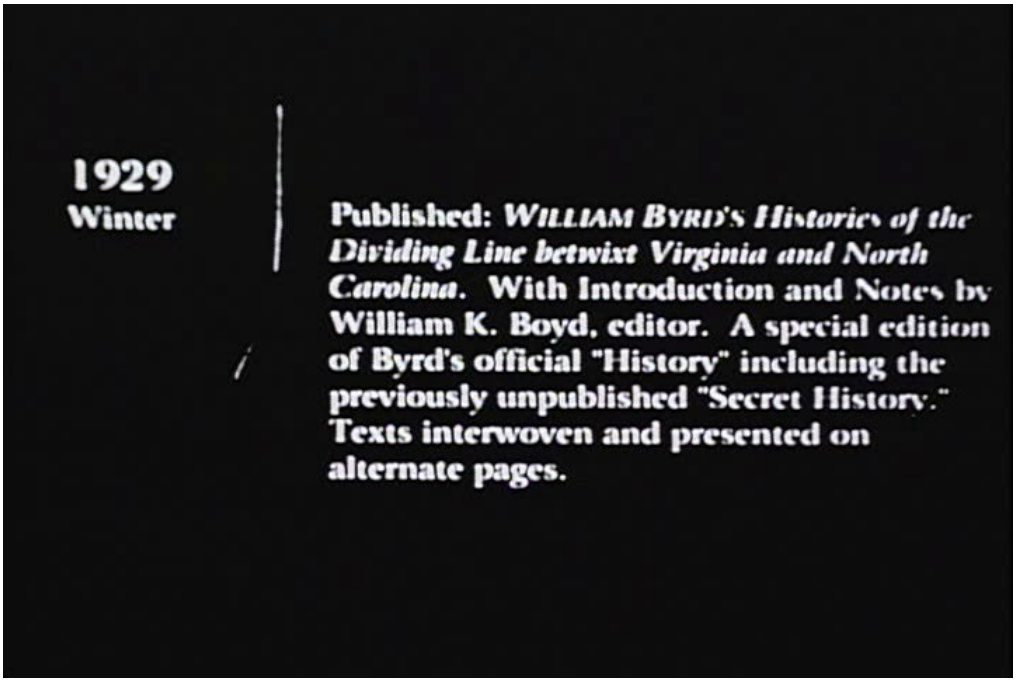


Most of these dates are present on screen only briefly, spanning at most only a few frames of film making it difficult to read in the single screening in which the film is usually shown. This series of dates, however, comes to include dates that deal with the settlement of Virginia, and with the life of William Byrd II.

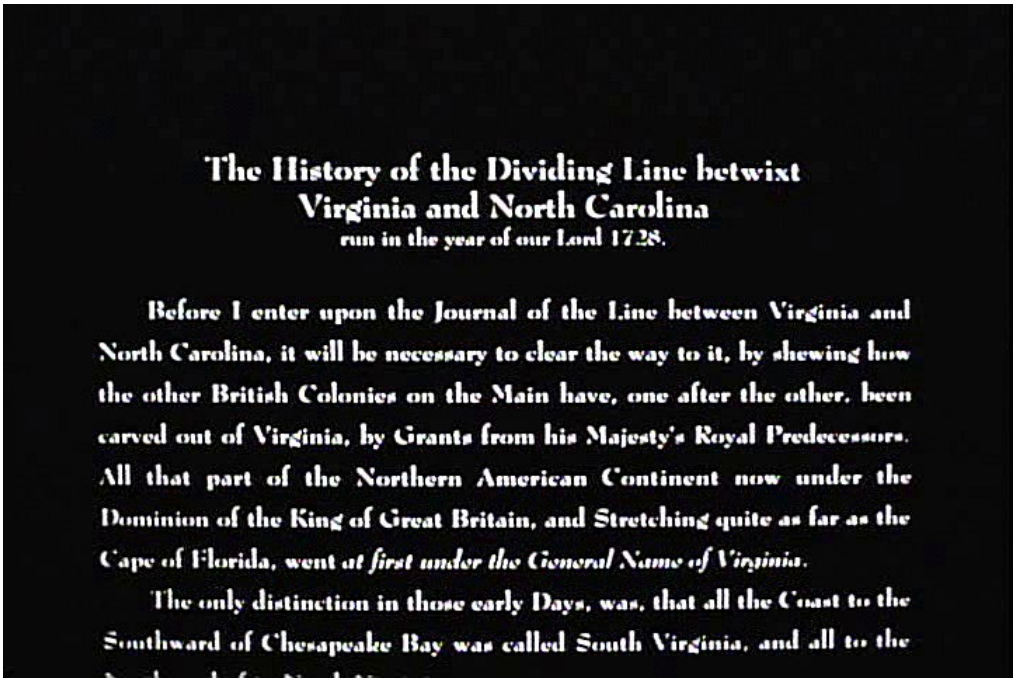


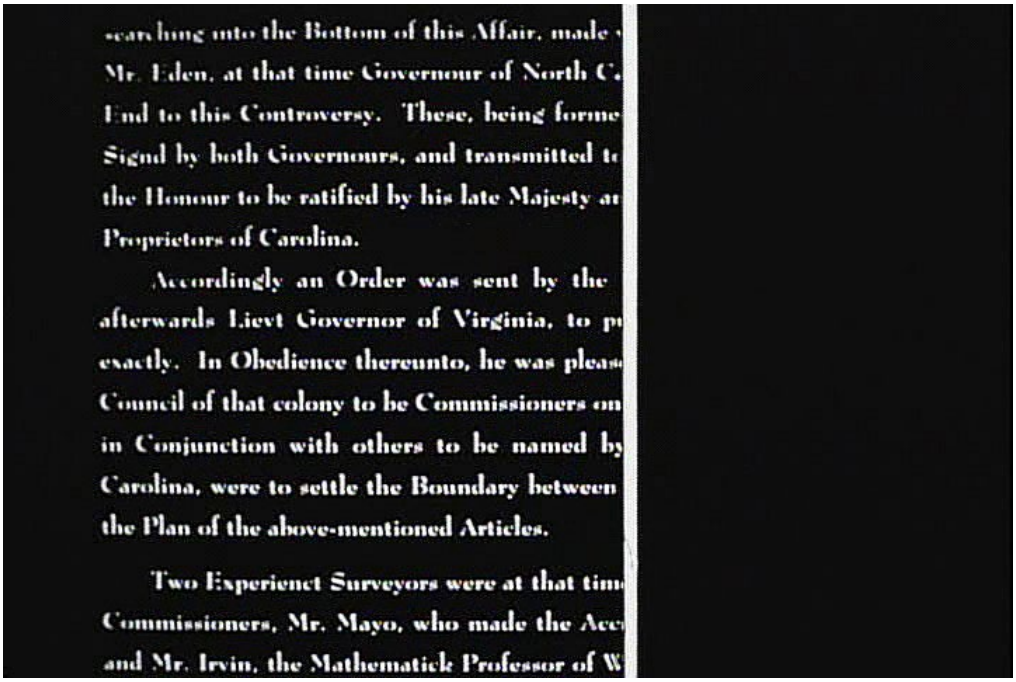


These dates are left on screen longer, and, as they progress, are increasingly focused on Byrd's involvement in a 1728 expedition to survey the border between Virginia and North Carolina. This expedition culminated, these dates tell us, in the publication two separate accounts, both written by Byrd: his official account, titled *The Official History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, and a personal account titled *Secret History of the Line*.[22]

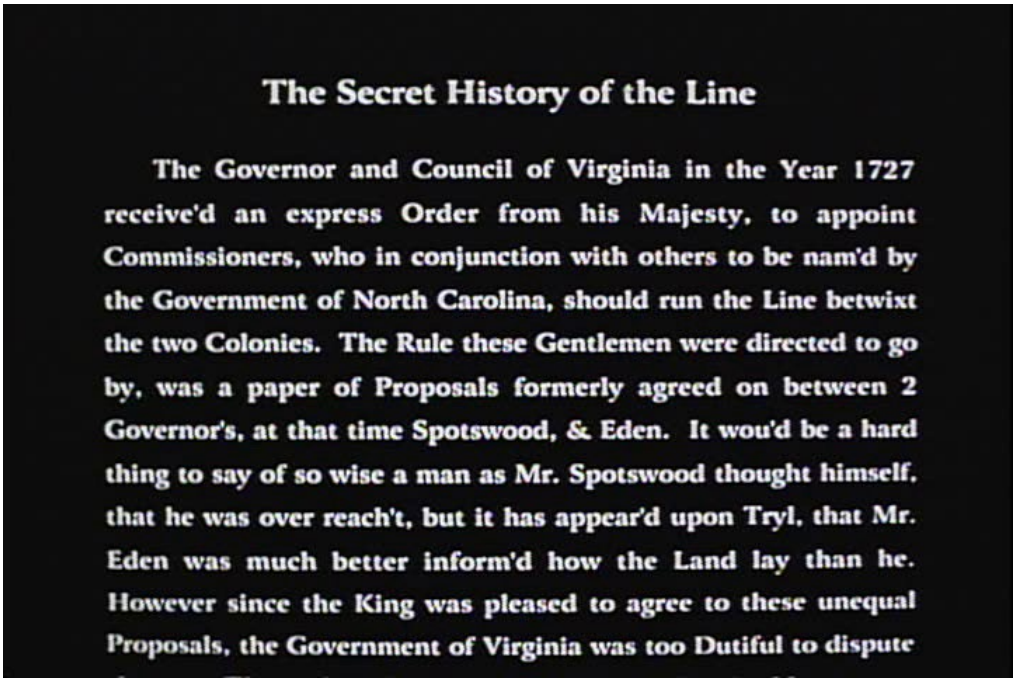


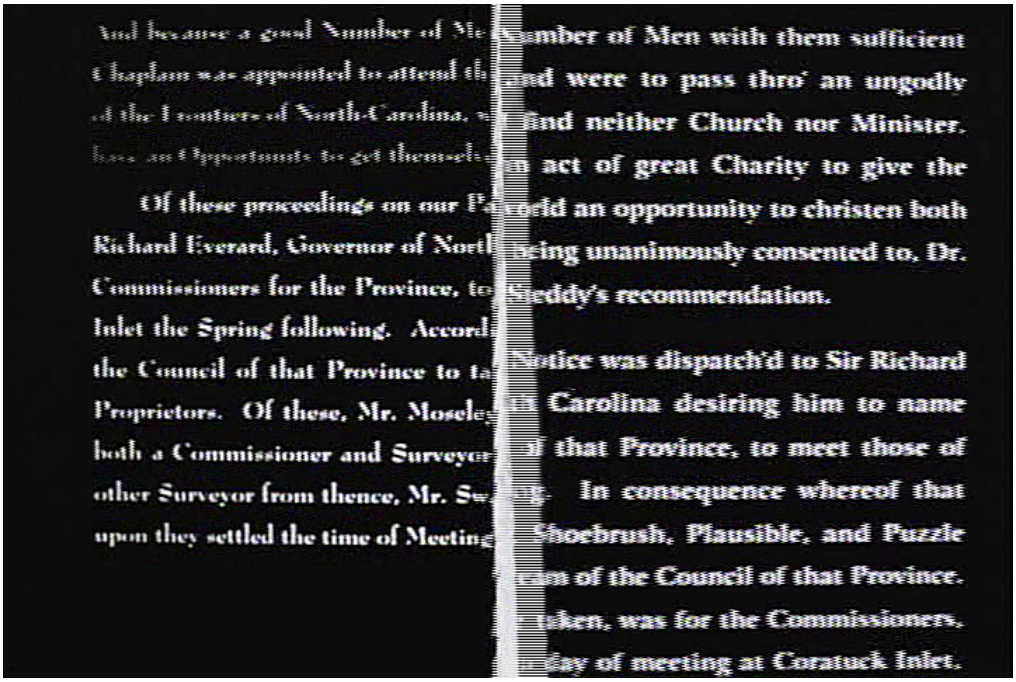
Following the presentation of these dates, the film presents several sections of text from Byrd's official account, offering a glimpse into its official and religious tone. The vertical tear, which had disappeared during the presentation of the dates pertaining to Byrd, then returns, disrupting the presentation of the text by splitting the frame in two and leaving half the screen black.



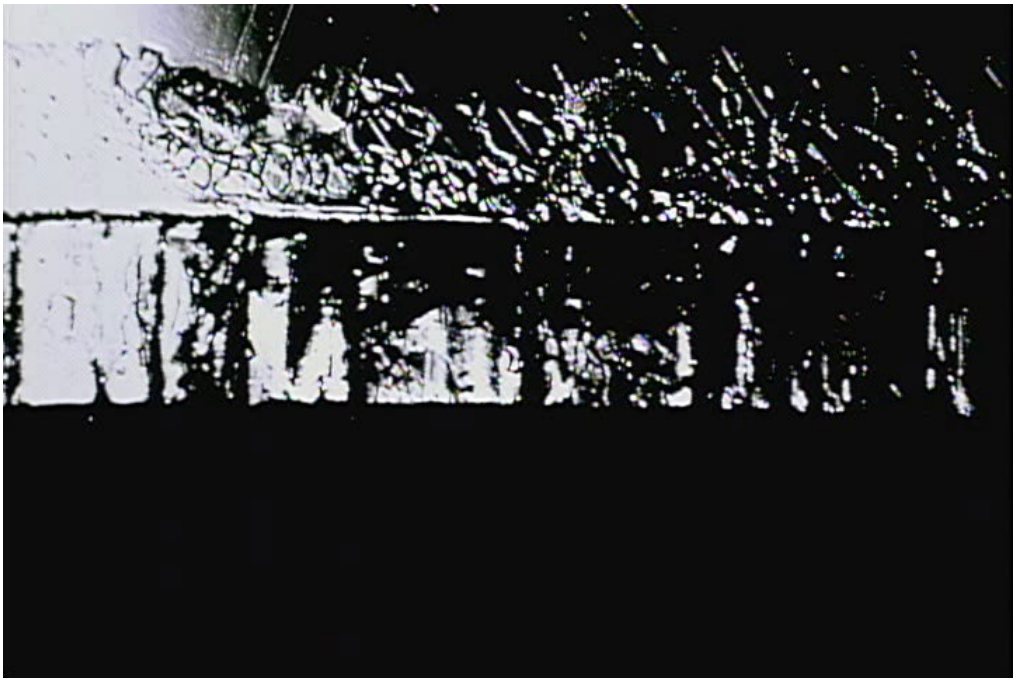


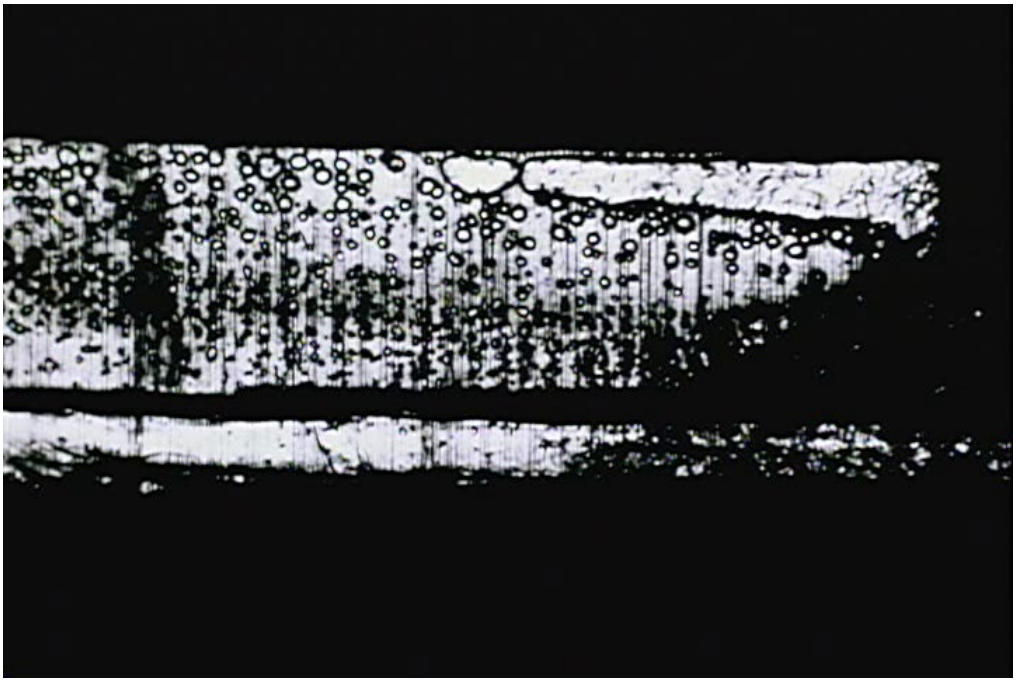
The tear then disappears again, and the film gives similar treatment of Byrd's secret history, presenting several passage that reveal the satiric tone it adopts in contrast to the official account. When the vertical tear reappears yet another time over this secret account, rather than split the image between text and empty space, it splits the image between the two historical accounts, encouraging perception of them as intertwined.



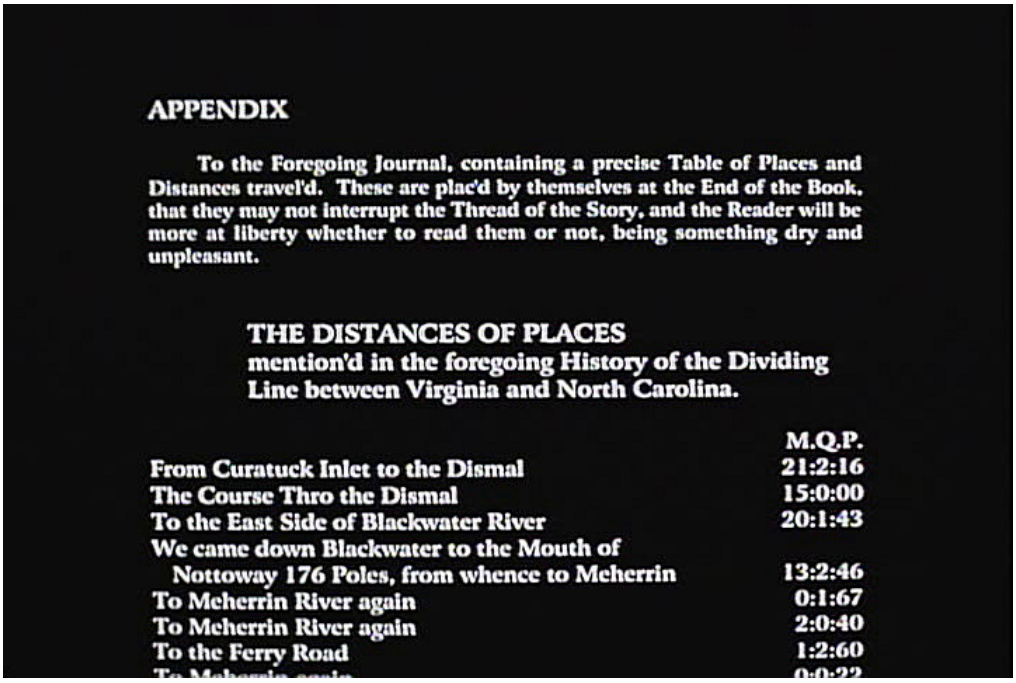


Following its manipulation of these accounts, the film enters a formal investigation of the film splice nearly ten minutes in length. A central component of editing, and indeed of filmmaking itself, the splice is the physical splitting and rejoining of film stock. *The Secret History of the Dividing Line* may not contain shots in the conventional sense of live-action cinema, but it does rely on splitting and rejoining celluloid stock. The vertical tear itself is a form of splice, and the film moves between dates and textual passages by means of the traditional horizontal splice. In this ten minute section, the film uses optically printed splices —the effect of which is to extend the amount of time they are on screen—to produce a flicker effect that gradually slows in tempo. These are rough, and not seamless, and they appear as bright strips in contrast to the black film stock. This contrast produces the flicker effect that is initially disorienting, but then dissipates as the splices are left on screen for increasingly longer durations, ultimately the splices are present for seven to ten seconds.





After this substantial section, the film concludes reproducing cleanly, without splices or tears, text from an appendix to Byrd's official account titled "The Distance Between Places," which lists the distances between all the physical, environmental landmarks encountered on the expedition.



Evident in this lengthy description of *Secret History of the Dividing Line* is the film's concern with both history and film aesthetics. The opening of the film, with almost a minute of sustained focus on the vertical tear, foregrounds a concern with engaging disruptive aesthetics, a concern that comes implicitly to link the film with the critical practice of the avant-garde. In the following series of dates, the film produces a teleological narrative of American history comprised of "cornerstones" of Western historical progress (e.g., as Marco Polo's return from the Orient), which evokes the formation of the United States as the culmination of the development of Western civilization. However, the clear presentation of this narrative is frustrated through the aesthetic device of the splice as the series is edited too rapidly to grasp the bulk of dates it presents. To emphasize the direct role of editing in this presentation, the vertical tear, ultimately a vertical "splice" continues to run overtop of this presentation, splitting the physical dates from their descriptions, and implying the role of its formal presentation affecting the perception of its content.

Structuring this sequence in this way has two effects. First, by evoking a broad teleological history and undermining its clear presentation through aesthetics, the film is suggestive of the desire of the avant-garde to use aesthetics as a means of challenging the authority of history. Second, by denying a clear understanding of that narrative the film evokes a sense of its own position in a moment where such broad, overarching views of history are increasingly obscured. Read in response to these effects, the inclusion of the dates pertaining to Virginia and Byrd resonate not just as the film's announced focus, but as an opportunity for focused historical understanding. When the dates pertaining to the settlement of Virginia are screened for a longer duration, it creates a smaller historical narrative, that of the settlement of a single state, which becomes an identifiable context in which the larger teleological narrative with which the film begins can be explored. Additionally, the dates pertaining to Byrd's life, which are the culmination of the dates pertaining to Virginia, and which offer an exceptional level of detail, form a concrete access point through which that large narrative can be engaged and reconsidered. These dates effectively position Byrd's involvement in the settlement of Virginia as what we can term a "microhistory."

Historian Carlo Ginzburg traces the term "microhistory" to historian George R. Stewart who, in 1959, used it to discuss the involvement of the Confederate general George E. Pickett in the battle of Gettysburg during the American civil

war.[23] For Stewart, the precise details of Pickett's involvement in that battle reveal not only why it unfolded how it did, but also how it led to the defeat of the Confederate army and the resolution of the Civil war. Using Stewart's reading of Pickett's charge as an exemplar, Ginzburg articulates microhistories as smaller, localized histories that address broad or overarching historical periods, events, and narratives, but are not readily alluded to by those periods, events, or narratives.[24] Pickett's charge offers great insight into Gettysburg and its ramifications, though narratives of Gettysburg themselves do not necessarily identify Pickett or his importance; Pickett is but a piece of history, but one that helps us understand it more clearly. Read this way, microhistories afford historians opportunities to explore such narratives through new access points, and to open them to greater clarity. Microhistory serves an additional purpose by addressing what Ginzburg calls "the acknowledgement of the limits of existence."[25] Not only do they reveal moments in history with greater clarity, they also circumvent the potentially unmanageable scope of history, reducing the focus of our historical understanding to a degree of specificity that makes it tangible (15).

For this reduction in scale, Ginzburg places microhistory in opposition to history that is macroscopic, qualitative and linear, and in which he finds its significant contribution to historical understanding. Microhistory allows for a thorough understanding of historical phenomena, something possible only through the reconstruction of all its constituent elements.[26] Additionally, and crucial to this discussion, it addresses and offers to move beyond the fragmentation of history in postmodernism.[27] Specifically, the particularities of these localized, often personal histories can compel us to reconsider events and narratives of major historical significance.[28] Reading *Secret History of the Dividing Line* through Ginzburg lets us seethe life of William Byrd II and his survey expedition as a microhistory that intersects the larger historical narrative initially offered by the film, that which culminates with a teleological reading of the formation of the United States.[29] As such, though Byrd is not a paramount figure in the history or mythos of the United States, his localized history can push us to reconsider that overarching narrative.

It is significant in this context of microhistory that the film shifts focus from history, the broad preoccupation of the avant-garde, to historiography, the writing of history, and a specific manner of engaging historical events. Indeed, Byrd's historical accounts of the settlement of the border between Virginia and North Carolina are offered by the film as the culmination of Byrd's microhistory, and the film's presentation and manipulation of those accounts thus becomes an historical investigation its own right. When the film presents sections of Byrd's accounts, it does so through a formal strategy designed to undermine their historical authority. For example, the film presents several sections of Byrd's official account, offering a sense of how the rhetoric of the official document expounds the importance of the expedition to the establishment of Virginia. When the film later shows sections from Byrd's secret history, Byrd's satiric prose suggests that it was personal greed and not state interests that lay behind the expedition.[30] The contradiction between these two texts can be grasped by reading them, but *Secret History of the Dividing Line* uses a formal strategy to remind us of its role in bringing their incongruities to light. Over the official account, the vertical tear returns, drawing attention to the tear's manipulation of the work. During the presentation of the secret history, this vertical tear contrasts both official and secret accounts, making evident the films formal work in bringing them together in this critical manner.

In this section, the film thematizes several issues circling the avant-garde and its crisis. Having positioned Byrd's accounts as entry points to a larger teleological history, the film foregrounds its primary aesthetic device, the disruptive vertical

tear that splits the image. In doing so, it forges a connection with avant-garde aesthetics and their urge to disrupt the authority of history, a connection previously established when the same tear renders illegible the series of historical dates. In what is essentially a visual metaphor, this device literally effaces history from the screen. However, as if enacting the loss of the efficacy of aesthetics to simply undermine history in and of themselves—though of course we might now question whether such efficacy was ever truly manifest—this device is ultimately invested within the film in an investigation of historiography. Whereas the vertical tear begins by challenging a presentation of history, it is redirected in this sequence as a challenge to the authority of historical documents, moving from what risks being a potentially empty attack on a historical narrative, to what is a revealing analysis of two documents representative of that narrative. And though the vertical tear might be nothing more than a formal element of the film, it is difficult to overlook the contrasting narratives provided by Byrd's two writings.

The presentation of these two documents, following as they do the film's complex presentation of historical dates, cues attention back to the critical project of the avant-garde, a project in which the film now appears embedded. It suggests that the use of aesthetics to undermine history, implicit in using the tear to obscure a historical narrative or an official account, is no longer an effective technique, working only to obscure fragments of a larger history that are, as the film itself enacts, impossible to grasp. However, in demonstrating the potential of aesthetics to mediate between historical accounts, the film asserts that this challenge can be recaptured in a historiographic process through which the validity of a larger history is questioned, and its authority shown to be based in rhetoric before fact.

The discussion between history, historiography, and aesthetics so far engendered is expanded in the section following Byrd's accounts, that which presents the formal investigation of the splice, the central aesthetic device at work in the film. As noted earlier, this section begins with numerous splices optically printed in rapid succession. The white line that appears where the black film stock has been cut and glued back together is brightly visible along with the otherwise dark frame. As the film moves through the splices it appears and disappears, the contrast of black and white producing a flicker effect that is disruptive of the type of viewing so far solicited by the film, one dependent on reading segments of text, and very nearly disorienting in its strobe effect. Appearing here, after the negotiation of historical authority through an aesthetic device, the violence of this flicker calls forth the aesthetic extremism of the avant-garde, the disruption of forms of reception that the avant-garde hoped would undermine artistic tradition. But no sooner has the section elicited this connection than it begins to slow the duration for which each splice is on screen. Gradually, the flicker is replaced by still images of the splices themselves, lasting on screen for up to ten seconds, images that reveal the splices are nothing more torn edges of film stock, smears of glue, and pockets of air bubbles.

Reducing these splices to their physical forms is anti-climatic in the wake of the flicker they initially produce, and it develops the suggestion made in earlier sections of the film that the aesthetic lacks any inherent political efficacy. Indeed, strengthened here is the film's additional suggestion that it is only the embedding of formal techniques within a specific context that gives them such efficacy, as well as the power to work against massive forces such as history and tradition. Of course, the avant-garde was aware that it was inserting its aesthetic extremism into the context of artistic tradition, a context in which it hoped that extremism would be shocking, disruptive, and subversive. The film, however, openly acknowledges that its aesthetic manipulations or decisions have little impact on their own, and that it is the historical investigation into which they are inserted that affords them their opportunity for subversion. The use of the vertical tear to obscure Byrd's official account is just that, an obscuring of historical document; it

forces no inherent social change, nor should it. However, when the tear is used to contrast Byrd's official and unofficial accounts, the film uses this aesthetic device in a practice of historical negotiation that is akin to the historical negation sought by the avant-garde. There is an acknowledgment here that faced with changing understandings of history, and with the degrading political impact of radical aesthetics, aesthetics now need to be engaged within conceptual frameworks, such as historiography or microhistory, if they are to address successfully the anti-historical stance praised by the avant-garde during its flourishing.

The rejection of history and tradition by the avant-garde was done in hopes of creating an idealized future. This broadly-shaped directive is not adopted by *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, its negotiation of historical understanding and film aesthetics is more subtle and nuanced. However, the final section of the film draws attention to its contribution to historical understanding by presenting the text of "The Distance Between Places." This section reveals to us the scope of the contribution of Byrd's account of the survey expedition, presenting the measurements he took in mapping the border of that state, and thus reminding us that the expedition contributed to the official establishment Virginia's borders and geography. With its focus on the measurable contribution of Byrd's account, this section also reminds us that historiography, though potentially fraught with contradiction and biases, seeks to produce an understanding of the world. As a result, the film's own investment in historiography, its examination of two historical accounts, is itself exposed as a process of understanding. It is invested in a historical project that can prove as useful to understanding narratives of national settlement and identity, narratives that can be as broad as the overarching narrative for which Byrd is offered as a microhistory. Yet, here focus is not on physical or definitive understanding, as is this final section of Byrd's account, but rather on an understanding of the contradictions and biases of history.

Secret History of the Dividing Line enacts the crisis faced by the avant-garde, as well as one means of developing and pursuing its critical ethos. In its formal manipulation of a historical narrative, it evokes the desire of the avant-garde to resist the authority of history, and to do so through aesthetic strategies. Yet, in its effacing of a "macro history" in favor of both microhistory and historiography, the film acknowledges that fragmentation and shifting perceptions of history might render such grand gestures ineffectual. Ultimately, the film thematizes the context of its own aesthetic program, demonstrating that a shift in focus and application might be seen to afford that program an opportunity for the kind of subversion embraced by the avant-garde. In doing so, it integrates that particular impulse of the avant-garde into a new framework. And, by tackling the crisis of the historical avant-garde, and by reworking its impulse into a new, applicable context, the film dramatizes that the impulse to continue to hold weight, and that it can be extended into current artistic practice.

Extensions of the avant-garde

To suggest that *Secret History of the Dividing Line* offers a means to extend the impulses of the historical avant-garde into contemporary artistic production raises additional questions, some common to many experiences of avant-garde (and experimental) cinema, others more specific. Though I have set aside issues of filmmaker David Gatten's intentions, my reading of the film, and my inference of its connection to this historical movement, pushes us to consider what value its interrogation of the crisis, and continued influence, of the avant-garde's anti-historical thrust. We might ask further whether this interrogation is a necessary outcome of the film, or its critical reception? And to what extent it is manifest in the film's reception?

Such questions, particularly the latter, require different forms of research and are difficult to answer. Still, they point to the different cultural operations in which the film is invested, and why its engagement with the avant-garde can be read as fruitful and valuable with a range of contexts. When Scott MacDonald suggests that the films of Gatten's *Secret History* series reflect on a century of avant-garde film production, his provocative comment that leads us to read elements of that series, such as the formal organization of *Secret History of the Dividing Line* in the grander context of avant-garde cinema, both in North America and abroad. Indeed, the formal organization of this film creates intertextual allusions to a range of avant-garde films and filmmaking techniques, implicitly positioning the film in a network of filmmaking practices. The flicker effect caused by the optical printing of the splices in the film's fourth section, for example, is explicitly reminiscent of many structural films of the 1960s, such as *The Flicker* (Tony Conrad, 1965) or *Ray Gun Virus* (Paul Sharits, 1966). Likewise, the formal investigation of historical works evokes a range of avant-garde films such as *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (Ken Jacobs, 1969) or *Marilyn Times Five* (Bruce Connor, 1973). Some other connections formed by the film are latent, discernible only through reading about the film or listening to the filmmaker, but these connections are evident to most audiences who are aware of the history of avant-garde film.[31]

The intertextual connections thus come to invest this film in the broad history of avant-garde cinema, with its different, occasionally conflicting schools, and its lingering connection to the historical avant-garde, a connection that is both terminological and connected to the avant-garde's aesthetic and political interests. MacDonald makes the implicit suggestion that Gatten's *Secret History* series as about locating himself within a community, and a history, of avant-garde filmmakers. In doing so, he opens our consideration further to reading in these films an investigation of an artistic practice that shares impulses and concerns with the historical avant-garde itself, and does so in a more direct way than the broad tenets of avant-garde filmmaking I offered earlier. Ultimately, scholars must infer the degree to which *Secret History of the Dividing Line* negotiates the avant-garde and its crisis. Through such inference, however, the film's historical inquiry becomes not only a "process of historical research," as MacDonald suggests Gatten sees his own films, but also an investigation of the changing position of avant-garde filmmakers and artists at the outset of the twenty-first century.[32] Indeed, the film explores how as the overarching concepts through which the historical avant-garde defined itself are increasingly stripped away, the task of the avant-garde artist changes, and the types of intervention they undertake begin to shift.

Secret History of the Dividing Line showcases above all its historical intervention. It dramatizes its formal interference in a historical narrative as a means of reading history critically, and of reflecting on broad narratives of national identity as contradictory, biased, opaque, and misleading. This critical position is not new, but *Secret History of the Dividing Line* is not simplistic or repetitive of existing criticism or approaches. Rather, it feels innovative, exciting, organic, and compelling. It is here, in that experience, that I find its engagement of the avant-garde to be fruitful. The form of criticism it employs extends back through the historical avant-garde, has been negotiated and contested for decades, and has been argued by numerous theorists as now void. Still, within the proliferation of films and filmmakers identified as avant-garde, some continue to embrace its critical ethos.

Responding to the "death" of the avant-garde, Matei Calinescu claims that the continued ability of artists to identify and engage social crises produces a continued existence of the avant-garde as a form of social criticism.[33] His comment elides the historical specificity of the avant-garde, but reminds us of its

continued influence. Indeed, numerous avant-garde filmmakers continue to speak to its ethos, albeit often in broad terms, despite its apparent ineffectiveness. *Secret History of the Dividing Line* offers a mediation between these difficult positions. It engages with the project of the historical avant-garde to reconfigure it, and to find its own avenue on which to pursue it. In doing so, the film points to the continued impulse of that project, but exposes new forms it can take, and highlights the active exploration by artists of techniques beyond the focus of the historical movement. Ultimately, this film speaks to us as scholars, filmmakers, and audiences interested or invested in the continued potential of avant-garde art. Indeed, the film both confirms the crisis of the historical avant-garde for us, as well as pushes past it, drawing attention to new avenues for those interested in an artistic practice that has already passed them by.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. To summarize with one term the entire scope of avant-garde, experimental, and underground film in North America is problematic. However, my intentions here are not to lump together the distinct intentions and products of the numerous filmmakers working in these fields. Rather, I wish to suggest the presence of an overarching avant-garde cinema surrounding these works—a statement in agreement with many historians of avant-garde film (Sheldon Renan (1967), P. Adams Sitney (1972, 2002), A.L Rees (1999), etc.)—and to locate within that cinema several concerns that intersect those of the historical avant-garde. I am also here identifying North American avant-garde cinema, responding to the distinction between it and European avant-garde cinema made by Peter Wollen in "The Avant-Gardes: Europe and America." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 14 (1981): 9-10. I want to treat the continuing accuracy of that distinction carefully, however, for it is itself historical, and unable to account for changes and exchanges in avant-garde filmmaking practices around the globe in the last thirty years. [return to text]

2. Scott McDonald, "Gentle Iconoclast: An Interview with David Gatten." *Film Quarterly* 61.2 (2007): 37.

3. See McDonald 36.

4. The use of "Secret History" here most likely connects Byrd's work to another secret history, the *Anecdota* by Procopius. A historian, Procopius wrote works championing the Roman emperor Justinian. However, centuries after his death, historians discovered an additional writing, the *Anecdota*, which offered a damning portrayal of the emperor. In its early publications, this revisionist history was called *The Secret History*. See Daniel Mendelsohn, "God's Librarians." *The New Yorker*,January 3, 2011, accessed June 12, 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/01/03/gods-librarians

5. Richard Schechner. "The Five Avant-Gardes or...or None?" *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*. Ed. Michael Huxley and Noel Witt. (New York: Routledge, 1996) 310.

6. Paul Mann. *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) 8.

7. Though this notion is explored by several historians of the avant-garde, I am drawing here on Matei Calinescu's lengthy history of the movement in *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 95-150.

8. Huyssen, Andreas. "The Hidden Dialectic: The Avantgarde – Technology – Mass
Culture." [1980] *After the Great Divide*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 4. Cf. Calinescu 102.

9. The influence of anarchism on the avant-garde is discussed by Huyssen, who downplays the influence of Marxism on the movement, an influence more fully stressed by Calinescu (104-105 & 125-132).

10. Clement Greenberg. "The Avant-Garde and Kitsch" [1939]. *Horizon: A Review of Literature and Art*. April 1940. 256. Accessed June 12, 2015, http://www.unz.org/Pub/Horizon-1940apr-00255

11. Calinescu 117.

12. This is a simplification of Bürger's argument in which it is important to note that a negation of the subsystem art does *not* equal a negation of bourgeois culture or ideology. However, as the subsystem of art is part of a larger social formation, its criticism works to enable a much larger self-criticism of bourgeois society. See Peter Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1974]. Trans. Michael Shaw. (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 20-27.

13. Bürger 17-20.

14. Leslie Fiedler. "The Death of Avant-Garde Literature" [1964]. *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler. Vol. 2*. (New York: Stein and Day, 1971) 454.

15. Cf. Mann 12-13.

16. Greenberg 260-61.

17. The undermining of the avant-garde by its paradoxical inclusion in the society and traditions it sought to overturn is the subject of numerous historical accounts. A succinct account of its dissipation of the avant-garde into numerous neo-avant-garde movements in performance is offered by Schechner. A more theoretical account of the death of the avant-garde, and the critical value of that death, is offered in Mann's book-length study. For a broad account of the avant-garde's formations and theoretical doctrine, readers can also turn to Renato Poggioli's seminal *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1962]. Trans. Gerald Fitzgerald. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1968).

18. I realize that the notion of grand narratives, or metanarratives as they identified in translations of Lyotard's work, are complex social mechanisms, our responses to which forming part of Lyotard's theorizing of postmodernism. See, for example, Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979]. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 12. I am setting aside here Lyotard's complex formation of this concept, and issues raised with the concept following its introduction, in favor of the suggestive reading of a cultural moment the concept offers, particularly with respect to our thinking about the continued efficacy of the avant-garde.

19. Calinescu 276.

20. For example, see David Gatten's description of his work on his website, accessed June 12, 2015, http://www.davidgattenfilm.com

21. The various filmmaking techniques used by Gatten are discussed in detail in his interview with Scott MacDonald. [return to page 2]

22. *Secret History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina* was not actually published until 1841, when it was released in a collection of Byrd's writings. *Secret History of the Line* did not see publication until 1929 when the North Carolina Historical Commission reprinted Byrd's official account.

23. Carlo Ginzburg. “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It.” *Critical Inquiry* 20.1 (1993): 10-12.

24. Ginzburg 12.

25. Ginzburg 15.

26. Ginzburg 24.

27. Ginzburg 32.

28. Ginzburg 33.

29. As the “Secret History” films progress, the microhistory of William Byrd is connected to other important components of American life, including the the Library of Congress, which may owe to the library established by Byrd, and thus the dissemination of knowledge in the New World.

30. Though difficult to discern in the film, in his interview with MacDonald, Gatten identifies the specific motivations revealed in each of these documents. The official document celebrates efficient tax collection and state administration while the unofficial version reveals the motivations to be the circumvention of trade tariffs. See MacDonald 40.

31. MacDonald discusses how Gatten uses of a mathematical formula to structure the optical printing of the splices, a further reference to structural film and other rigorously structured avant-garde cinema. It is unlikely, however, that one can discern the formula during view without prior knowledge of its existence. See MacDonald 37.

32. MacDonald 36.

33. Calinescu 124.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Jon Jost's *The Bed You Sleep In*: art, truth, and subversion.

By Hing Tsang



Jost was living a spartan life style in rural Oregon when he made and appeared in his autobiographical film *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes*.



By the 1990s Jost had established himself as an internationally known independent filmmaker, whose films were shown at festivals and broadcast on television.



Just over forty years ago, an important essay by Julia Lesage (reprinted in this issue) championed the early work of celebrated U.S. independent filmmaker Jon Jost, praising both its formal innovation and socio-political relevance.[1] [open endnotes in new window] The film in question was *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes*, an essay film that according to Lesage took much from the highly personal and often autobiographically flavored work of U.S. writers such as Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and Sylvia Plath, yet it was also informed by the political and formal experimentation of Jean Luc Godard and Jean Pierre Gorin. Lesage remarked that Jost's film was a "gentler, more personable, more humane, and very U.S. version" of the Marxist post- 68 work from the two French filmmakers. Her essay also emphasized that the film was distinct from the closure of either narrative fiction or the linearity of documentary, but it also attempted to link personal and collective concerns in a way that as an audience we "question our and others' experiences." This was also achieved through an emphasis on locality and place—characterized by a "human use of the environment" that took into account the often improvised and uncertain nature of our emergent historical and political relationships. Lesage ends her analysis in an open fashion, wondering how Jost would develop these themes in his subsequent work.

What follows is an attempt to answer this, with special reference to one of Jost's most acclaimed and accessible features called *The Bed You Sleep In* (1993). This was a film that was part of a long career that continues to blur the boundaries between experimental practice, documentary, and fiction[2] through practice that has been exhibited in cinemas and art galleries as well as being broadcast on television in Europe and the United States.[3]

The Bed You Sleep In arguably represents Jost at the height of his powers during his foray into more narrative-style filmmaking in the 1990s. Jost had recently won the John Cassavetes Lifetime Achievement Award in 1991, and his work was both publically funded and seen at film festivals and in art cinemas. At the time of its release, the film was highly praised by Jonathan Rosenbaum, as a "tragic, beautiful, and mysterious film" (1995) .[4] Outside of the United States, the Australian film scholar, Adrian Martin, described the film as a "brilliant corrosive work" (1995).[5] Taken together with two other films, which also starred the same actor Tom Blair—*Last Chants for a Slow Dance* (1977) and *Sure Fire*(1989-1990) —Martin has also claimed that *The Bed You Sleep In* was part of "one of the greatest, most important and powerful bodies of work in all cinema." More recently, in a book about independent U.S. cinema, the British film critic, Geoff King, draws our attention to the fact that the film is a narrative centering on the break down of trust within family relationships which nevertheless radically subverts Hollywood norms of continuity and mise en scène, straddling the line

After a long exile in Europe and Korea, Jost returned to the United States in 2011, where he is still making experimental films that combine fictional and documentary elements.

between “avant-garde abstraction and more costly narrative film production” (2005: 139). While a little more needs to be explained about the avant-garde elements in Jost’s work, it should be noted that Jost’ working practice has always been more akin to the artisanal practices associated with documentary and experimental filmmaking.[6] With little more assistance than that of a sound recordist and a camera assistant, Jost has always operated his own camera and edited his films.



Tom Blair began a long lasting collaboration with Jost in *Last Chants for a Slow Dance* (1977). Here, he plays a misogynist drifter.



Tom Blair as Wes, the small town business man in *Sure Fire* (1990



Tom Blair as Ray in one of the final scenes of *the Bed You Sleep In* (1993)



An early sequence in *The Bed You Sleep In* establishes Ray as a family man and a lover of nature.

It is important to note as well that Jost’s work (at this stage of his career) is resolutely narrative. This can be more readily understood through a brief overview of the film’s plot and formal structure. The film is a story of an ostensibly happily married middle-aged man who is a nature lover and the owner of a lumber mill in a small U.S. town. His life is turned upside down when he is accused by his second wife Jean of sexually abusing his own daughter Tracy. Ray denies this, but we later learn that the daughter has committed suicide. Upon returning home, Ray finds that Jean has taken her own life. Unable to bear this he shoots himself at the end of the film. In other words, this is a tight story with a classical structure, involving a limited amount of characters, which takes place in a unified time and place. The location in which the film was shot is a small town called Toledo which had seen much better days, especially during the long-gone heyday of the timber trade.[7] Jost also wanted to represent something quite general that was directly relevant to the contemporary United States. On repeated occasions, Jost has defined the film as a testament to the breakdown of social trust and dialogue within the United States, referring both to the hysteria surrounding issues of childhood sexual abuse and a more widespread deterioration of all areas of public discourse.[8] Shouting and accusation replaced listening and understanding.



"I just thought you should know that your daughter’s dead, No I’m not kidding. She killed herself last night".

Nevertheless, it should be noted at this stage that the film is also characterized by extended moments when the camera moves away from the characters and their story to look languidly at images of nature, the workplace and winding narrow



Ray embraces Jean for the last time.



Ray takes his fate into his own hands.



Movement within frame occurs against strong primary colors in the background and is augmented by the use of short focal lengths.

country roads, producing "a sense of the mood and texture" of small-town United States. (King 2005: 140). Indeed, over a third of the film shows pure descriptions of workplaces and landscapes, some of which do not feature people. The duration of the shots—many of which last over two minutes and are entirely static—exceed what viewers might be used to experiencing within a narrative feature or even an informative documentary.

But it is here that a recent essay by Lesage[9] can also inform our engagement with the seemingly more forbidding experimental elements in much of Jost's work. Rather than emphasising the "abstract nature" of avant-garde practices, she refers instead to what she calls the "lyrical avant garde," embodied in the work of contemporary colleagues of Jon Jost, most notably Leighton Pierce,[10] but also Bruce Baille, Gunvor Nelson and Midi Onodera. She contextualizes this practice through making connections with a documentary description of place. Lesage tells us that "objects and environments always have a story to tell about social relations, about what's unique and typical." For the filmmaker, this is accompanied by a strong acknowledgement of the importance of visual pleasure and an engagement with the aesthetics of film craft. Lesage remarks that

> "great viewing pleasure comes when a film/video maker structures a vision of everyday spaces for me so that I can attend to urban and domestic locales in ever new ways, and I return to the such films to re-experience their expressive perspectives."

These remarks highlight both the importance of our ever shifting relation to place and the role that film as a creative art form has to play in renewing and transforming these relationships.

And this is an important idea during a time when there has arguably been a reification of form within mainstream U.S. fiction filmmaking. This is implicit in David Bordwell's recent writing on cinematic staging. He reminds us that "the standard scene remains a conversation" within much commercial fiction practice. Bordwell also refers to a generalized "stand and deliver approach." This is characterized by an "intensified continuity" style (2005: 22), dependent on the use of master shots and reverse close-ups; it has been influenced by standardized television practice across all continents (30). As an alternative, Bordwell recommends "depth-oriented" cinematic direction in which "staging and editing cooperate" (17). Bordwell applies this concept of depth-oriented directing through an analysis of the work of filmmakers such as Mizoguchi, Angelopoulos, and Hou Hsiao-hsien. But Bordwell's overall account of filmmakers, as active agents in the pursuit of their craft, working within specific social contexts, also applies to the work of Jon Jost.

And with equal relevance to what I am trying to say in this essay, Adrian Martin, has recently espoused an idea of "social mise en scène." He highlights the social commitments of the filmmaker, so that we are aware of contexts as well as the long established rituals and habits that are then defamiliarized and even contested within a given film (2014:129-131). Martin is careful to remind us that he does not want to repeat the tired tropes of "auteur theory" but instead draws our attention to shared engagement with "the newly grasped raw material of social codes." It is then that "known rituals are recreated, marked, inscribed in the flow of the film, usually in order to be transformed" (Martin 2014: 134). Nevertheless, what both Lesage and Martin have referred to in terms of "ritual" and "interaction" takes place in a physical environment whose physical and temporal depth is expressed through camera position and composition. This is what I shall now attend to first of all. Jon Jost's *The Bed You Sleep In* is very

much a film about place.

Jon Jost's dramatic landscapes



Details in the foreground and background are integrated through the use of strong perspective lines within the frame.



"I found myself in Toledo, which sits on a steep set of hills on the Yaquina River, where in its front yard a large Weyerhouse corporate paper mill sprawls. The vertical streets, the classic small-town American architecture Main Street instantly drew my attention." – Jon Jost



"The entire visual aspect of the work was fully developed prior to shooting, not with a story-board, but with still pictures and a conscious strategy for using visuals to cue the content of the overall film." – Jon Jost

Jost's landscape shots are integrated within the overall aesthetic of his films. Intimate narrative sequences which highlight human interaction are interposed amongst lengthy sequences that draw our attention to the wider social and geographical contexts of the region. In this sense, the overall structure of this later film, *The Bed You Sleep In*, shares much in common with the earlier 1970s film, *Speaking Directly*, in regard to which Lesage referred to the juxtaposition of more "homely" sequences and other more abstract sequences that described the global realpolitik of the United States in the early 1970s.

Almost twenty years later in a film likewise shot in Oregon,[11] in *The Bed You Sleep In* Jost begins and ends his narrative with the world of work and the factory. The film does not so much convey a picture of unmediated nature but rather the often uneasy relations between humans and nature at the end of the 20th century, constantly being worked out in provisional and contested terms. The film begins with extended sequences of the logging mill, lasting over three minutes; it ends with a wide shot of the hills desolated by long-term deforestation.

Furthermore, if we look at individual compositions in formal terms, we see that Jost emphasizes deep perspective so that we gain a sense of an evolving social world. Within the shots of the workplace, the use of a wide lens and accompanying depth of field provide strong perspectival lines, drawing our attention towards both the centre and exterior of the composition. Planks of wood or logs at the bottom frame point perpendicularly to the centre of the composition and also overlap with the borders of the frame so that we have a sense of a world outside the frame.

Part of the reason for the dynamism within the individual frame lies in the fact that this particular town has a hilly landscape, allowing Jost to include the paper mill and the logging factory juxtaposed within one single shot. This often gives a slightly cartographical feel to the film; the landscape shots link individual viewers to a wider landscape without such an image ever becoming the equivalent of a scientific view from nowhere. Therefore, in one of the first compositions we see traces of the paper mill from the perspective of the logging mill. The camera is positioned for a slightly high angle shot that privileges the perpendicular lines of the foreground. These perpendicular lines are also perspectival lines, whose vanishing point lies just to the right of the paper mill in the distant background.

Formally, this composition anticipates much of the deep staging and aesthetic concerns of the rest of the film. The fact that the smoke of the paper factory almost engulfs a group of trees and is seen from the perspective of another workplace that employs local people anticipates the themes of community, labor and (global) environment also highlighted in the film. But it is also an extremely ambivalent image that anticipates the epistemological and ethical questions explored in explosive terms later in the film. Implicit here is an acknowledgement that we perceive reality from a situated perspective that reflects a specific historical horizon not of our own making. The individual's view is limited and deeply colored, for better or for worse, by the beliefs of the communities one identifies with. But Jost's visual style here also hints at the importance of lived perception and our need to see our shared world in ways that exceed the contingent and take into account wider global contexts.[12]

Nevertheless, it suffices at this stage to highlight the painterly nature of Jost's imagery. Color and light are equally as important as line within Jost's compositions. Strong contrasts between bright and shaded areas contribute to the



Color is combined with strong tonal contrasts produced by natural light. Evidence of human presence also adds scale to the composition.

internal dynamism within the frame. Tonal contrast contributes to the energy of the overall composition where shaded areas occupy most of the upper part of the frame. Small objects such as a brightly illuminated car parked on a more diagonally-orientated road break up the composition, preventing it from being monotonous or oppressive. In fact, Jost's practice takes much from the pictorial disciplines of painting and photography. Jost himself[13] has often spoken about his admiration for other visual artists, referring in particular to the paintings of Edward Hopper—where strong tonal contrasts are further broken up by small but very visible objects or human figures often placed away from the center of the frame. Jost has also expressed his admiration for the landscape photography of Joel Sternfeld.[14] The work of this U.S. photographer is notable for its use of strong diagonals within compositions that document across urban and rural contexts neo-liberalism's excesses and its detrimental effects on the quality of life. In Sternfeld's work (and Jost's), roads and railway tracks are foregrounded in a way that they break up the frame either laterally or twisting into the distance. We gain a view of the environment which might be lyrical but does not shy away from focusing on the effects of industrialization and consumer culture.



Automat by Edward Hopper (1927)



Lake Oswego by Joel Sternfeld (1979)



This color photograph of an abandoned train line in New York was taken in 2000 as part of the *Walking the Highline* photo-series.



All the Vermeers in New York (1990) has remained one of Jost's most accessible and popular features but was also totally improvised without a script. Jost was granted access to the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Perhaps even more well-known is Jost's long-term admiration of Vermeer. He refers directly to the Dutch artist's existing work in the eponymously named film, *All the Vermeers in New York* (1990). Here, I can trace some of Vermeer's influence on Jost's visual style by recalling some of the observations of Svetlana Alpers in her analysis of Northern Painting. Alpers makes a clear distinction between the descriptive presentations of everyday life which characterize Dutch



Vermeer's *The Little Street*.

painting and the rhetorical persuasion and dramatic narratives of earlier Italian painting. She also draws our attention to cartographical elements within the Dutch painters' composition, through their inclusion of maps and diagrams and the slightly heightened perspective of many of the paintings from this period. The U.S. theorist also draws links between painting, early lens culture, and mapping, where "the distinctions between measuring, recording, and picturing were blurred" (134); thus the paintings achieved through graphic description "a meeting place of the world seen and the world pictured" (35). Many of these kinds of visual concerns are reinvigorated in Jost's work, as I shall attempt to demonstrate, although there are also major differences that reflect different worldviews of these artists across centuries.

Nevertheless, for the time being it suffices to note that Jost also uses flat planes that might otherwise block our perspectival vision within overall compositions that still suggest spatial depth. For example, the four following images which occur between more overtly dramatic sequences, flat surfaces are incorporated within compositions that overall still suggest depth and context.



Strong lines and expanses of a single color are combined with strong perpsectival lines that direct our sight line beyond the borders of the frame.



The flat surfaces of modern human habits are off-set by perspectival lines that direct our eye towards an environment that is not man-made.



The prettyness of the house is off-set by the dark woods in the background. Specks of color at the bottom of the frame also provide tonal contrasts.



Strong modernist lines, which emphasize flatness and the harshness of contemporary civilization, are broken up by both foliage and small areas of color.

In the first of these, the image's flatness is broken up by both perpendiculars which draw our line of vision towards vanishing points which would otherwise be obscured, while in the second image perpendicular lines hint at the existence of a vanishing point far outside the frame's right edge. Elsewhere, as we can see in an image of a small house and a larger town-building, the flatness of a surface, which is presented to us face-on, is broken up by dark foliage either in the foreground or the background. In the images, graphicality is always integrated with a painterly



Doug is played by Marshall Gaddis. Jost had worked with him previously in *Slow Moves* (1983) and *Bell Diamond* (1985) shot in the small American town of Butte.



Gaddis had experience of Jost's improvisatory style and was also used to Jost's practice of integrating film actors within real locations from his experience in *Bell Diamond*.



Once Jost had written the main scenes, he encouraged both actors to visit the lumber mill several times and work on their scenes.



Jost was also confident in Tom Blair's acting

texture emphasized by strong tonal contrasts between light and shadow.

Pictoriality and social mise en scène

My emphasis on graphic elements and tonal contrast emphasizes the dramatic elements within Jost's visual depiction of the Oregon landscape. Equally, it could also be argued that Jost's visual approach to dramatic sequences with actors is also highly pictorial in a way that stands in contrast to much Hollywood production and televisual practice.[15] For Jost offers something aesthetically much richer, through his use of composition, camera movement, and staging of characters within the social context of small-town United States.

This is evident in sequences that would otherwise resort to the kind of standard set-ups decried by Bordwell (2005) and Martin (2014). After an extended descriptive sequence that shows the mill's workings, we are introduced to the mill owner, Ray, who is speaking to his colleague, Doug. In other words, this is a standard conversational set-up between two people. But immediately notable is the absence of a master shot that would allow us some kind of privileged access to the geography of the room. Instead, Jost employs "aperture framing."[16] This term, taken from Bordwell, simply means a frame within a frame. Jost uses the visual device to allow us equal and even access to the individual psychology of the close up, the inter-subjective interaction of a conventional two shot, and a wider sense of social geography. Therefore, the close ups either Ray or Doug include the window on either side of the frame or near center in the background. In addition, Jost's aperture framing also includes maps and diagrams in the background, which break up the flat surfaces by adding tonal contrast and texture. The presence of maps which locate the mill within a specific local U.S. geography also remind us of the potential connections between the individual and the collective[17] even if the events of the later sections of the film also show that these relations can be extremely fraught.

The individual close-ups themselves are also distinct from the symmetry and parity in shot-size associated with classic reverse shots in mainstream Hollywood films and across televisual practice. Instead of focussing our attention solely on faces and individual psychology, Jost's compositions convey a sense of pictorial autonomy because of their internal dynamism. Backgrounds are broken up and the slightly off-center positioning of the human figure combine with background elements to create strong lines of vision that point outside of the frame at different angles. Such cinematographic composition is different from more televisual methods of breaking down a scene, where the most important concern is "matching" shots of human faces.[18]

It should also be noted that the dialogue of the scene is rooted in the cadences of everyday speech yet still reflects widely held attitudes towards the United States' precarious position on the global stage. The two men speak about everyday business procedure, before complaining about competition from Japan and also about local environmentalists. The acting here is extremely low key, as if we are eavesdropping on a private conversation between colleagues. Both men move rapidly between different topics, often not enouncing their words fully, sometimes looking away from one another—in a way that works in a differently from either Hollywood melodrama or televisual fiction. "Social mise en scène" is used here in

abilities despite some angry disputes about Jost's improvisational methods in *Sure Fire*.



The actress Ellen McLaughlin had not worked with Jost previously but was already known for her role as Angel in Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America*.



Both Tom Blair and Ellen McLaughlin had worked as stage actors. Ellen McLauglin is known these days as a playwright in her own right.



Ray, do you want to make love?

such a way that we are immersed in the everyday attempts of people grappling with situations that are not of their own making and whose consequences they do not yet fully understand. Their attempts to attribute a poor business climate on environmentalism and competition from Japan ignore many complex factors such as the long-term effects of over-logging and the many changes within economies of scale and technology.[19] In other words, Ray and Doug are wrong about most things. But it should be noted that Lesage elsewhere has also reminded us that the emergence of social identity is always provisional and fallible, and "we may also want to show how they or we misrecognize ourselves, misunderstand our own identity or social roles" (2014). It is the tragic dimension of these issues that I will be bringing to the fore in the latter part of this essay.

Nevertheless, for the time being, I would note that Jost's *The Bed You Sleep In* is not strictly speaking a documentary in formal or technical terms. In contrast to the spontaneous practice of, say, Frederick Wiseman or the Maysles brothers, Jon Jost's film is a fictional narrative that was fully scripted before shooting, unlike some of his earlier improvised fiction films. It is therefore characterized by a formal control associated with fiction film direction that also allows us access to intimate scenes amongst its characters that would be intrusive in non-fictional contexts.

This can be seen in a short romantic interlude that portrays the seemingly loving relationship between Ray and his second wife Jean. The scene is simple enough. We see a middle-aged couple prepare a picnic. They kiss and then leave frame to make love. But here I want to show how Jost's economy of means provides us both with a sense of the environment and also strong emotional empathy for his protagonists.

The sequence consists of just two shots, but it is the combination of camera position, choreography of actors and accompanying camera movement that sustain and heighten our involvement as viewers. Jost begins with a wide shot that is framed from a high angle, allowing us to see the textures of both the wood and the table. His choreography of the actors also allows the characters to enter the frame individually at slightly perpendicular angles, thus adding to the depth within the frame. As an audience we are able to see the full-bodied gestures and rhythms of two individual people who have become totally at ease with one another. It is only after we see Jean place food on the table and the couple have sat down on the flat surface in such a way that we see them frontally that Jost cuts to a tighter shot. This shot, which is filmed almost over Jean's shoulder, reminds us of her status as a strong confident woman. The height of the camera gives even more prominence to the textures of the woodland and the interplay between light and shadow. The sequence ends with a pan that follows the couple embracing and leaving the frame to make love, so that as viewers we are left with a view of strong sunlight shining through the trees.

Therefore, in a relatively short and simple sequence we can see Jost as a painterly visual artist who explores the interplay between texture, light and color. But we are also aware of Jost as a fiction director, where composition, choreographed movement within the frame, and co-ordinated camera movement work in tandem in a way which is consonant with Bordwell's attention to cinema's potential to combined both theatricality and pictoriality (2005: 9). And finally, we also sense an underlying documentary attention to the daily details of working people's lives in Jost's work, which in this particular instance is marked by lyricism and gentle sensuality.

Nevertheless, the apparent harmony between husband and wife is short lived and never again repeated. Instead, the film proceeds to demarcate distinct spaces for men and women. We become increasingly aware of two distinct physical and



You mean out in the truck…No out here!

mental “worlds” within Jost’s account of small-town United States. Men are seen going out and about in the town, conducting their business activities, eating and drinking with other men, or fishing together near a stream. These activities, which occur either outdoors or in brightly lit interiors, are contrasted with the more intimate relationships between women that take place within the enclosed spaces of private homes. Behind these closed doors, Jost also presents us with forms of female communication and intuitive understanding that are more oblique yet more intimate than the different forms of male impression management, seen in this and other films by Jost.[20] Most notably, we also become witnesses to conversations between women friends that confront the very dark side of human nature, which here includes physical and psychological abuse.

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Locating people in their own lives



Jost uses real locations and actual people. The building permit officer here is played by the actual person who worked in the town hall.



"Well thanks. That'll help. I'll try and be back in about a week. "



"You've been a good contractor, Ray."

On the other hand, it is with the activities and interactions of men that Jost initially describes the life of the small town.[21] [open notes in new window] An integration of pictoriality, tightly controlled fiction direction, and documentary-like delineation of locality can also be seen in two sequences that describe centers of social interaction. In the first of these, Ray visits the town hall and discusses the legal costs to expand the logging mill. It displays some formal similarities with the earlier office scene in the mill. Aperture framing is re-employed in such a way that aerial photographs of the region dominate the backgrounds of the two characters.

However, rather than using an alternation of single shots and televisual cuts, Jost employs a series of parallel tracking movements from one character to another that prevent easy psychological identification. The presence of photographic aerial views of the town in the background highlights the inter-relations between individual, environment, and social collective which was originally emphasized in both Lesage's early essay and Jost's own written account of his artistic practice. [22] A similar kind of cinematography can also be seen when Jost employs additional tracking shots that move away from the dramatic action and show the daily activity of people within the office. After the building inspector has said goodbye to Ray, the camera tracks across various pictures across a wall to reveal several women working in another room.

It should be noted here that both the building inspector and the employees are not played by working professional actors, but by local people who actually worked in this location. On exiting the office, we see a wide shot in which Ray exits the town hall. A tilt-up on to the front of the external building becomes a camera pan that follows Ray walking and reveals a wide vista of the town and its main road. Ray is now dwarfed among the modern but slightly decrepit buildings that characterize the small town. In other words, the highly choreographed camera movements and movement of people within the frame does not draw attention to the technical virtuosity of the filmmaking process or to Jost as a would-be latter-day "auteur." Instead, the techniques used here suggest that occasionally fiction filmmaking can "locate people in their own lives" (Lesage 2014). As Jost films people who live and work in the town, doing things that they normally do, we are attentive both to what they do and the physical details of the environments in which they are doing things.

This is especially true of the next sequence I will analyze, where we now move from the local town hall to a busy café. The sequence itself consists of an unbroken take, lasting five minutes. However, before I attempt to explain how the sequence holds our interest, I wish to borrow from some of the observations of Han-Pile in her recent Heideggerian analysis of Dutch painting. The Anglo-French theorist recognizes that within many of Vermeer's paintings, we are seeing people doing things. She describes our projection into visual images in terms of a viewing practice that is not reducible to psychological identification or the technical details of what is done. Instead we are told the effect of such a sensibility:

> "It requires us to be able to intuitively open up the network of relations and possibilities associated with the practices themselves, a peculiar



Ray walks out of the town hall.



Jost's use of camera is highly orchestrated, but it is also highly naturalistic in its attention to location and the activity we see inside the café.



In an unbroken take, we are allowed to see images of work activity that are not normally associated with fiction production.

> ability which is afforded us by our competence in performing similar tasks. Thus such projection is existential rather than psychological in that it rests on our ability to be in the world and to press ahead into our own possibilities." (Han-Pile: 2010)

What is also hinted by Han-Pile's account is how the artist employs immersive techniques that allow us to be participants in the sequence rather than distant neutral observers. This is achieved through disciplined technical means. Jost made his own circular track out of plastic piping that allowed him to circle the café several times, pointing in different directions. Because he used a café during normal opening hours and was filming both its staff and the local clientele, he had to rehearse the shot meticulously before shooting. Jost, as in all of his films, shot on an extremely low shooting ratio, which also accounts for the freshness and spontaneity of the imagery here.

As viewers, we project ourselves into a hive of social activity, where people are drinking, talking, ordering food, eating, and washing up. The use of an unbroken mobile take allows us to see the cafe in a way where objects are seen in close up framed by human figures, who are then framed through doorways. Human figures, irrespective of whether we see them from the front or back, also forefront and frame other human figures in the background because of the circular trajectory of Jost's camera. On the soundtrack, itself we hear a mixture of fragments of individual daily conversations, the clinking and clunking of cutlery, and a lyrical, buoyant accordion-led melody from Erling Wold.

In thematic terms, the multiple perspectives created by both the movement of the camera and the layers in the soundtrack also suggest a complex, ever shifting inter-relation between the individual and the wider social collective, where neither is ever permanently subsumed by the other. This arguably hints (at least, at this stage of the film) that artistic creativity and revelation occurs through an engagement and immersion in historically and geographically rooted communities. Individual art practice is thus an embodied extension of what already exists in our daily activities and has been socially acquired, but it is also capable of showing "what is in ever new and fresh ways," ideally, eliciting a "sensuous or emotional reaction" in the viewer (Lesage 2014).



Through naturalistic description and a sculptural use of camera, the viewer gains access to the social interaction of the local community.



The movement of the camera provides both distant and close-up views of people and objects.

But it should not be forgotten that the film charts what Martin originally described as "a double auto-destructive tragedy" (1995), where two suicides result from a breakdown in trust. This does not occur out of the blue but is integrated within the film's other descriptions of social rituals and tasks. What Lesage calls



"I guess most people fish for relaxation. That's why I fish."

the "darker aspects of human action and the complexity and ambivalence of human consciousness" (2014) is hinted at in a sequence that is largely lyrical and sensual in tone. Here, we now see Ray fishing and at peace with nature, and we are introduced us to Scott, who is the new boyfriend of Ray's daughter. It is Scott who will later trigger the tragic events of the film, most notably, when we see him announcing Tracy's suicide by telephone.

Nevertheless, initially intimacy is suggested both by the closeness between the characters and to the filmmaker himself, who is shooting barely inches away with a wide-angle lens. But it is notable that the conversation is stilted and Scott does not seem to be able to concentrate on either the task itself or engage with the older man. Tension is also augmented through the use of a rough looking circular hand-held shot that draws attention to the young man's nervousness.



"How about you, why do you want to be a fisherman? "



"Trout got your tongue?"

This serves as an uneasy prelude to what would otherwise be an extremely lyrical moment in the film. A circular tracking shot gradually reveals both ripples in the currents of a large stream and greenery on the opposite bank of the flowing water, thus serving as another reminder of the constant intertwining and shifting between micro and macro phenomena. On the soundtrack, we hear Ray's own comments about the art of fishing:

> "There's some people I know who'll tell you, it takes a lifetime to learn all there's to know about fly-fishing. Fishing's about taking your time. It's not about getting ahead of yourself. I'd say it's about learning to read the situation, seeing what's presented to you. When an opportunity is presented, to know about how and when to take advantage of that."

On its own, this particular combination of sound and image could be read as a metaphor for forms of lived intelligence that are responsive to specific historical and geographical environments. Such intelligence might then be manifested in the creativity of art, political action, as well as the practice of fly-fishing. Yet the images that precede and succeed this moment problematize this, reminding us of the many difficulties we face in trying to understand and respond to circumstances around us. We are also in the presence of an encounter between men where there is a hint of both subterfuge and rivalry. The sequence continues with a series of awkward glances between the two men. In compositional terms, the figures are both placed towards the edge of the frame, and accorded discordant shot sizes that produce a sense of unease and threat.



Ray casts a bemused glance at Scott after the young man cuts his finger on one of the fish hooks.

This is further augmented by a final disturbing image in this sequence that shows a live fish changing color through a series of flashes, which have been created through the use of computerized post-production techniques. Our attention is also drawn to the movement of the fish struggling to "breathe" in a new environment, hinting that from this moment on there will be irreversible and unsettling changes in the lives of his characters. This is also followed by a move away from the lightness of natural exteriors to the darker, more fraught dialogues that occur

behind closed doors.

	
"For someone whose supposedly interested in fishing, you've been asking all kinds of questions except about the fishing? Something on your mind?"	"Why didn't you tell me, you've been with my daughter? "
	
Discordant notes on the soundtrack augment a shot which is noticeably darker than the equivalent shot that ended the picnic sequence with Jean.	The changing colors of the fish anticipate the dramatic changes that are about to occur in the lives of the characters as well as hinting at the wider ecological concerns of this film.



Speaking Directly: Some American notes was shot on a budget of $2000 and was championed by the British film theorist Peter Wollen for its mixture of political engagement and formal experimentation.

Mirrors and disclosure

Once we move into the private spaces of the home, Jost re-employs his use of aperture framing. He incorporates doorways and windows within his compositions, but he also brings in mirrors and reflections gradually into the center of the frame, so that the image now reflects back on itself in an asymmetrical fashion that might suggest the alienation of the self. While it would be tempting to see this through the prism of well-worn Lacanian cliches,[23] it should be noted that Jost had previously included the use of mirrors in *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes*. In her essay about this film, Lesage saw this as part of the overall Marxian concerns of a film that located individual psychology within a national and global political context. Our attention was directed towards a shot of Jost seemingly addressing us directly in an open field. It then turned out that this shot was an image in a mirror, which, for Lesage, indicated a disjunction between what we what we feel in an "emotional intuitive" sense and what we know in a "factual, intellectual" one. But both of these sensibilities were a reflection of our implicated positions within the political and economic contexts of the United States after the Vietnam War, so that Jost's work surpassed the narrow strictures of avant-garde formalism.

Almost twenty years later, Jost returns to the use of similar devices. While the earlier film privileged the monologues of Jost—the young individual male filmmaker—it is now the interaction between women that is forefronted. We become uneasy participants in tense private conversations between Jean and her friend Beth. It is the intuitive, often tacit understanding between woman that is



Jost uses the mirror in his first feature as a way of suggesting that we are all implicated participants in politics at home and abroad.



Kate Sanella was also an actress who collaborated with Jost for the first time during the shoot in Toledo. She would also have a small part in Jost's *Frame Up* (1993) and a major role in the digital feature *Home Coming* (2011).

emphasized before we witness an explosive exchange between Jean and Ray in which accusations of incest are made. In the former, we are privy to intimacy, understanding and solidarity, while in the latter we become implicated as witnesses to conflict and confrontation. In formal compositional terms, there is also a notable movement away from more oblique compositions to seemingly direct "frontality," which is nonetheless undercut by cruel irony, as I shall attempt to demonstrate.

Jost's use of oblique compositions can be seen in a conversation between Jean and her close friend, Beth, who speaks about the effects of her husband's long-term unemployment on family relationships, where the husband is inflicting psychological abuse on his wife and children.



Jost also notes in his reflections about the film that his shots of women are almost always taken from 45 degrees to side, and "often above or below because women interact in a more oblique way than men."



"Who are you meant to tell all this stuff to, you know, I've been getting worried, I've been getting really worried, it's been seven months since Bill's been out of work."

The sequence begins with a series of single shots where harsh diagonals both disorient us and emphasize the space between the two women who are both shot at a 45 degree angle from the side. In the equivalent of what might otherwise be a two-shot, Jost presents us with a composition in which Beth is in the foreground and Jean is seen in a reflection on the left-hand corner of the frame. They are now facing completely different directions. Furthermore, the effect of the mirror and the slightly high position of the camera pointing downwards toward the corner of the room creates a distance between the two women that is greater than it would be, had we been looking at them directly through a more conventional two-shot. Without the addition of lenses and mirrors, the two women would have been sitting close to one another at adjoining corners of a table at a 45 degree angle, and their eyelines would have met in a way that could be associated with the self-contained intimacy of earlier Dutch painting in for example Vermeer's "Mistress and Maid" or the "Music Lesson."



Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid*.



Vermeer's *Music Lesson*.



Detail of the mirror in Vermeer's *Music Lesson* showing the relation of the two figures.



Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter.*

However, there are also further compositional differences that I wish to refer to in a heuristic fashion in order to show the sophistication of Jost's visual technique both in this particular sequence and in the later explosive exchange between spouses where mirrors are employed again. Most notably, in Vermeer's "Music Lesson" two figures are shown in the lower section of the same frame. They are not quite looking directly at one another as the woman has her back to us and the man is posed at a slightly oblique angle. But in the upper third of the frame, the reflection of the woman brings about a new virtual eyeline between the gaze of the man and the woman. Indeed, we could almost draw a line between their eyes using a ruler, thus augmenting what Han-Pile describes as a "strong mood of peaceful concern and intense absorption" (147).

Jost's work takes us in a somewhat different direction, whereby the use of mirrors create unexpected changes in the direction of the characters' eyelines and hint at



"Forget I said that, we'll work it out. But you know, sometimes I'm afraid."



"But if you approach some people on the street like this, and you stop them, and you talk to them in this way, they'll liable to get angry."



"She said there were these things that she couldn't say on the phone… Well she's not coming down."

the need for constant self-correction in all of our epistemic commitments. And indeed, even though I have so far emphasized the distances that are created by the use of mirrors and emergence of new eyelines, something altogether more ambivalent is present in this sequence. Firstly, it should be noted that the dialogue between the women is paced in a way that contrasts greatly with the fast and sometimes scattershot remarks, made by Ray and his colleague in the earlier office sequence.[24] Even and regular pauses in the conversation indicate that each woman is listening and deliberating carefully about what is being reported and said. Beth's remarks not only about her husband's domestic violence but also his refusal to attend counselling provide further hints at major differences between male pride and female intuition. Accordingly, the latter seems to be more measured and interiorized but is still open to lived and living experience.

Thus, it could also be argued here that the outward movement created by diagonals within the frame and the new contrasting directions in eyelines also point us to the existence of a continuing world outside the borders of the frame. It is perceived by individuals but which also transcends individual egos. It is also significant here that the camera tracks with the two women as they leave the house and embrace each other outside, so that we see their renewed friendship against a background of wider landscapes. Thus, individual solidarities, which in this and other Jost films are marked by solidarity between women,[25] are not merely the reflection of arbitrary subjectivities but also hint at wider collective struggles that are taking place throughout the social world.

However, the embrace between women friends serves as a brief interlude amongst moments of increasing estrangement and confrontation, culminating in an explosive exchange between Jean and Ray. A short angry sequence directly prefigures this. Outside the café, an itinerant preacher confronts Ray and recommends that they pray together in order to atone for Ray's "sins" and "arrogance." Camera position and composition highlight the aggressiveness of much male psychology and behavior. The two men, who have never met one another before, are shown facing one another directly, staring into one another's eyes, barely inches from one another, as is the camera, which captures the confrontation through extreme close-ups. This stands in direct contrast to the oblique distances and quiet deliberation that was prominent in the conversations between Jean and Beth. It is then that we experience some of the most intense moments of the film, where Jost plays directly with our perceptions of both frontality and proximity in equal measure.

On returning home from work, we discover that Jean has received a letter in which Tracy accuses Ray of physically molesting her. She reads out aloud the contents of the letter line by line, all of which Ray denies. The argument is unresolved and their antagonism intensifies. The sequence commences with two frames that employ similar strategies to the composition with mirrors in the earlier conversation between Jean and Beth. Ray is seen sitting on his own before Jean enters the frame and we realize that what we have just seen is an image in the mirror.

It is also significant that the presence of the mirror once again forces the eyelines of the two protagonists to be directed in opposite directions. With the inclusion of a reflection of Jean's back in the mirror, the image suggests an alienation of the self, which is then forefronted in a second shot that in terms of conventional filmmaking might otherwise be considered a "single." But in this asymmetrical shot Jean's back is seen in the mirror thus contrasting with the frontal view of her reading the letter in the lower section of the frame and accentuating the distance between these two different views of the self.

It is worth recalling here that the motif of woman reading private correspondence

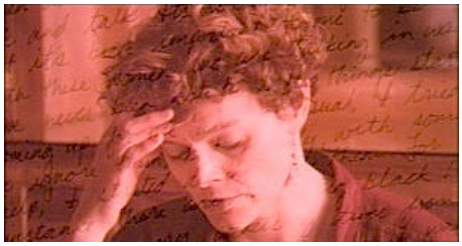


"No, I want you to listen to this and then you tell me the Truth."

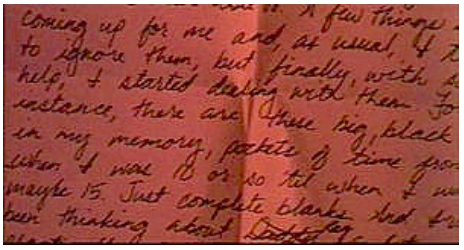
is a repeated theme in much Dutch painting. But it is here that Jost's thematic concerns far exceed any graphic similarities between his work and that of the past. Alpers originally spoke about the "fugitive" nature of the letter in paintings from period (1983: 192). She notes that in none of these works are we allowed access to the content of the letter:

> "they take their place among other objects represented in the pictorial world and like them are to be seen as representations rather than objects for interpretation" (207).

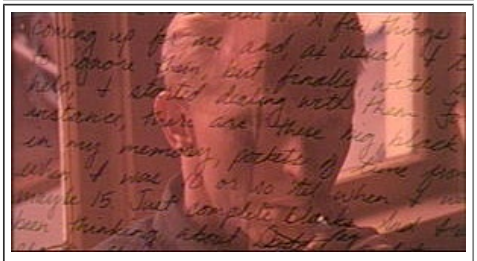
In contrast, Jost's visual and narrative use of the letter brings epistemological and interpretative issues to the fore. His characters want to know the truth, and their attempts to do so are underpinned by antagonism, distrust and rage.



"And I was always telling people how much I loved him."



"I've been getting memories, not so much memories but images."



"I don't know how to put this better except to say that I never want to see him again."



"So you're saying Tracy's a liar that she'making all this up."

It should be noted that the contents of the letter are directly revealed and are superimposed over what by Jost's standards are fairly conventional single shots of Jean reading out the letter aloud and reaction shots of Ray listening in stunned silence. The letter is now printed directly on the screen, and the word "Daddy" has been crossed out and been replaced by "Ray."



Visual interest in this profile shot is maintained by both natural backlight and a background that still suggests depth and the passing of time.

The sequence is developed in a series of singles rather than two shots. Separation and alienation are further accentuated, because of the presence of harsh diagonals behind the heads of each character, which are the product of the placement of the camera directly opposite the corners of the room. Two shots that show Jean and Ray in profile and bear some resemblance to the use of flat planes of colour in Dutch painting, serve as an angry prelude to one of Jost's most innovative use of mirror reflections in the film.

A slow zoom focuses upon a reflection in a large metallic vase of Jean in extreme close up. Directly beside her look of consternation, we also see the out of focus contours of Ray's face, which is then brought into focus at the same time as Jean's face becomes a blur. Aside from the fact that this use of a long lens offers a very



Natural backlight from a window shapes the head, while the flat surface in the background is also broken up by vertical lines and the irregularity of the leaves.



“And tomorrow I don’t know what I’m gong to do. I think I’m going to drive up to Seattle and see Tracy or her counsellor or whatever she’s got up there.”



“And suddenly I’m a monster.”



“You really think he did it? I don’t know. I don’t want to think he did.”

different alternative to conventional use of two shots and single shot reverses, this particular moment brings to the fore the central role of epistemic commitment in Jost’s moral vision.

Truth, subversion or denial?

This is possibly the most controversial part of my argument. While the term Truth has sometimes been an uncomfortable and even derided term within some areas of film studies influenced principally by post-structural theory, it is Truth (without scare quotes) that is driving the encounter between these two people and forcing them to justify and challenge their beliefs.

This is not to say that this is a straightforward process where Truth is readily obtained. Instead, it is a process that is fraught and often characterized by conflict and denial. By this stage of the film, we have empathized—albeit in different ways—with two individuals who are mature, responsible and sensitive. Yet during this exchange, we quickly become aware that rather than an exchange taking place we are faced with two people who deny the validity of the other person’s outlook and his or her account of events.

As viewers we are also thoroughly implicated because Jean and then Ray are looking at us almost directly. The position of the camera and the absence of cuts prevent us from escaping their glares. And as much as the use of close ups would seem to invite psychological identification, this is not possible because of the extreme polarities of the characters’ moral positions. Indeed, we are ever so slightly aware that the apparent proximity between both figures (as much as the proximity between their faces and ours) is an effect brought about by the use of mirrors and the changes of focus produced by Jost’s use of the zoom lens and his manipulation of the focus ring. Thus, instead of direct psychological identification, we are immersed in the fraught and often unfinished processes by which we attempt to distinguish Truth from falsehood. Jost’s use of frontality and proximity, which would otherwise directs us towards notions of transparency and dialogue, has now brought us to what can only be described as “misrecognition” and “misunderstanding” (Lesage 2014).

A hint of some possible respite from this impasse is provided in a short sequence, where Jean confides in her friend Beth about the accusations. Here, Jost abandons his use of mirrors and shoots in a way that highlights the urgent intimacy between the two women. Beth and Jean are filmed slightly from the side at a 45 degree angle, which again suggests a form of communication between women that is more tacit and intuitive than the brashness of male conversation or the angry clashes between opposing sexes. A simple but extremely powerful medium close up shot of Beth embracing the tearful Jean against a white wall complements the previous embrace that occurred outside the house. Beth promises to visit Jean again in the evening. But this is cut short by a trajectory of dreadful events.

Ray returns home after receiving a phone call from Scott, announcing that Tracy has committed suicide. Discovering that Jean has taken her own life, Ray drives away in a car and shoots himself in a way that would seem to be provide fictional closure. But the story does not end here. Jost’s camera now tracks up from the dead body to reveal hills which have been devastated by deforestation.[27] The shot is succeeded by an intertitle that quotes from Emerson’s "Prudence":

> “Every violation of Truth is not only a sort of suicide in the liar, but a stab at the health of human society.”

These observations can now be read as highly cautionary within the political and



"I won't tell a soul, I promise, not a soul."

ethical context set up by the film. If, according to Emerson, lies represent a form of suicide, it follows that human sociality, including our potential for self-transformation and social transformation, runs parallel with our attempts to distinguish Truth from falsehood. But such a process, which involves direct perception, listening to the testimony of others, justifying our beliefs and contesting what may eventually turn out to be either true or false, is often fraught and arrested in its tracks by denial and subterfuge. Indeed, to borrow the terms laid out in Lesage's "Perpetual Subversion" (2014), such a process is "subversive" because it requires a form of existential honesty that is not reducible to subservience to received ideas or recourse to reified concepts. And it is also "perpetual," because our attempts to distinguish Truth from Falshood are always highly fallible and demand both constant criticism and self-criticism. It therefore follows that when denial obstructs existential honesty, its consequences are inevitably tragic and devastating on both a personal and collective level. A family has been destroyed and a wider physical landscape has been laid desolate.

It is here that another intertitle appears:

> "In November 1992, Wheeler Manufacturing, the mill shown in this film was closed for lack of the availability of raw timber. Environmental concern for the marbled murret and financial competition from Japan for raw logs were cited as causes for the closure. Seventy jobs were lost."

But some caution needs to be exercised in taking this statement at face value. The intertitle's acknowledgement that environmentalism and financial competition were "cited" for the mill's demise rather than presenting these commonly received opinions as absolute fact, serves as a reminder that the economic and social issues surrounding the loss of jobs are part of an extremely complex historical and geographical process. As I have hinted earlier, the activities of environmentalists and competition from Japan were relatively unimportant factors in the demise of the timber industry, especially in the face of technological change, economies of scale, pre-existing deforestation and changes in legislation regarding foreign exports.[28] Nevertheless, my attempt to warn against easy generalization may run the risk of detracting from the relation between viewer and film that is particularly interactive here.

Instead, the observations of Vivian Sobchack are rather more apt here. The U.S. theorist speaks of forms of "documentary consciousness" that can occur in the context of fiction film and are dependent on an embodied relation between active viewer and film image rather than any single film's status as an isolated object. She refers to our own "extra-textual knowledge" which draws out attention away from specific fictional characters towards an "existential world," so that we are

> "looking both at and through the screen, dependent upon it for knowledge, but also aware of an excess of existence not contained in it" (1999: 246).

Her account does not privilege any single filmic form or narrative device as an authoritative voice but instead points to a potential form of "opening up" towards continuing historical issues that precede and exceed any single film text. And more importantly, this also serves as a reminder that the human, ethical, and economic issues that are brought up in Jost's film are ongoing issues, whose complex causes and effects are often forgotten or negated amidst the collapse of U.S. social dialogue. It is at this point that we also see a series of images that show the different places of work and recreation within the town—now devoid of the presence of the actors that we have seen previously. This further draws our attention to lives (our own lives and other people's lives) that are continuing to be lived out within a world whose social and economic contexts predate and exceed



Jon Jost and his girlfriend Elayne in rural Oregon during the early 1970s.

the limits of any single fictional film narrative.

This highlights the major similarities and differences between *The Bed You Sleep In* and *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes*. The earlier film featured a youthful and cheerful Jon Jost, addressing the camera directly, where he emphasized the importance of continued dialogue in our own personal "you and I" relationships. He reminded us that however engaging or homely his personal relations might appear, it was much more important that we also attend to our own relationships and own actions, strongly hinting at the importance of relating what we might have learnt from second-hand experience to our own first-hand daily experience. Jost believed that the success and meaningfulness of his film could only be gauged

> "to the extent that it articulates and clarifies an awareness already inherent, however submerged and suppressed, in its viewer" (Jost: 1975).



Jost's digital work in *Passages* (2006) also embraced many of the painterly techniques of modern art.

However, it is now the submersion and suppression of our awareness and self-awareness that is brought to bear through the destruction of the U.S. social, moral and physical landscape. Shortly after the completion of *The Bed You Sleep In*, Jost would begin a long period of exile in Europe. The fictional events of this film also provide an infelicitous and eerie echo of tragic events in Jost's own personal life. After moving to Portugal, his own daughter was kidnapped by his ex-partner Teresa Villaverde, who then made a film called *Sal e Agua* (2001) that provided the mother's account of the abduction, using the young daughter as a main actress. Shortly afterwards, Jost's ex-partner was granted sole custody by the Portuguese courts, and Jost has not seen his daughter again to this day. He would later make an experimental digital video piece called *Passages* (2006), which was dedicated to his daughter as a form of love-poem, and he has maintained an online blog containing letters directly addressed to his daughter and copies of past correspondence between himself and his estranged partner.[29]

In this sense, rival accounts from estranged partners and the collapse of all bonds of trust between family members mirror the traumatic events of Jost's fictional film. This also means that the inter-twined issues of trust and social collapse now gain an added tragic poignancy when viewing *The Bed You Sleep In* some twenty years later. Although I have contrasted the narrative aspects of the later film against the auto-biographical elements of the earlier film and have also drawn attention to the unique aesthetic features of Jost's work as a fiction director, both films now stand much more closely together as highly complementary pieces. They highlight the extremely complex issues of personal relationships and how these are negotiated in communities whose political, economic, and ethical values are far from ideal. But what was previously a bold call for reflection and self-control in the earlier film is now deeply colored by a frank acknowledgement of our immense proclivities for denial and self-denial.

This is an admittedly bleak note on which to end my analysis of Jon Jost's *The Bed You Sleep In*. Nevertheless, it remains my hope that this essay has conveyed something of the film's aesthetic sophistication and deeply felt ethical concerns, which will serve as a modest contribution to increasingly greater critical engagement with the work of one of the United States' most prolific and creative

visual artists.

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Notes

1. http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC05folder/speakingDirectly.html .
Reprinted in this issue.
Lesage's essay has also been highly influential upon my work on Jon Jost in my recent book—*Semiotics and Documentary: The Living Sign in the Cinema* (2013). In this book, I have employed a Peircean approach to film practice in order to offer an alternative to semiological and structural approaches.
[return to page 1]

2. Dennis Grunes has written extensively on both Jost's earlier and more recent digital experimental work in his book on *World Cinema* (2010), which is an expansion of his online blog where he has written numerous reviews of Jost's work: https://grunes.wordpress.com/tag/jon-jost/
Essays on *Speaking Directly* (1975) *London Brief* (1997) and *Passages* (2006) can also be found in Tsang (2013: 67-98).

3. All of Jost's work can be purchased directly from his website:http://www.jonjost.altervista.org
Examples of his work can also be seen on: https://vimeo.com/jonjost

4.http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.net/1995/10/the-bed-you-sleep-in-2/

5. This was originally part of a review by Martin in 1995 that is now available at his personal website: http://www.filmcritic.com.au

6. More information about the technical details of the film's production can be be found at: http://www.jonjost.altervista.org/work/thebed2.html

7. See note 17, where I draw the reader's attention to the long-term decline of the town.

8. More details about Jost's motives for making the film and his methodology can be found on his own website:
http://www.jonjost.altervista.org/work/thebed2.html

9. http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/LesagePerpetualSubversion/

10. Jost has expressed his admiration for the work of Leighton Pierce in the following essay; http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/feature-articles/pierce/

11. It is a very different Oregon that Jost has returned to in the 1990s. The state had experienced severe depopulation in the 1980s due to the decline of the timber industry. Some 750,000 people out of around 2.5 million had left the state.

12. It should be noted that this overlaps with Lesage's critique of philosophical naturalism (2014), which "sees environment as overwhelmingly shaping people's lives" and tends towards fatalism and reification. It could also be argued that the

distance between the two workplaces is also an indirect testament to the longstanding decline of the logging industry and changing global contexts in which production processes and markets are geographically dispersed. Nevertheless, Jost's film does not claim to be a factual documentary, and my analysis here is as much informed by U.S. philosophy, particularly the U.S. pragmatist tradition, which emphasizes both the notion of horizon and emergent but fallible human agency—see Tsang (2013).

13. These observations are also based on a series of conversations I undertook with Jon Jost during several visits to London between 2005 and 2008. I am extremely grateful for his generosity and his comments on an earlier embryonic draft of this essay.

14. Sternfeld's work can be viewed on his own website:
http://www.joelsternfeld.com

15. Bordwell refers to the widespread use of "formulaic decoupage" in European Art Cinema as much as in mainstream Hollywood cinema, with the result that "drama has been squeezed down to faces - particularly eyes and mouths" (2005: 141, 27).

16. Bordwell (2005: 104, 105, 119, 161-162, 210).

17. For more on location and social relations, see Doreen Massey, "Geographies of Responsibility,"
http://oro.open.ac.uk/7224/1/geographies_of_responsibility_sept03.pdf

18. See Katz (1991) for many examples of classic cinematic and televisual uses of decoupage.

19. It should be noted as well that the decline of Toledo is something that has occurred over a much more extended time period than is accounted for by the conversations that we overhear in the film. Toledo had emerged as a boomtown soon after the country's expansion west. At one time it possessed as many as eighty lumber mills, but it was already in decline by the 1920s. It had also been eclipsed by Newport, which became the new county seat in the 1950s.
http://www.cityoftoledo.org/about/

20. In my conversations with Jost, he has spoken much about different male and female sensibilities, contrasting outward aggressiveness with tacit intuition This is evident to lesser and greater extents in *Last Chants for a Slow Dance* (1977) and *Sure Fire* (1989-90). Both films feature Tom Blair as a calculating and manipulative misogynist.

21. I have used Lesage's phrase in order to highlight my indebtedness to her recent work:
http://www.ejumpcut.org/currentissue/LesagePerpetualSubversion/2.html

22.http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC05folder/JostNotes.html

23. Also see Lesage:
http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC04folder/ScreenReviewed.html
[return to page 2]

24. It should be noted here that Jean and Beth's remarks about the state of the U.S. economy are far less assertive or shrill than what is heard from Ray and Doug in the earlier office sequence. Jean also speaks about the consequences of long-term deforestation, which is strangely passed over by the menfolk in this film.

25. This also draws attention to the fact that Jost's work from this period demands

further critical attention and that further work would also examine female solidarity and agency in both *Sure Fire* (1988-1990) and *Frame Up* (1993).

26. For a concise and accessible account of epistemological defenses of Truth and its role in democratic deliberation see Misak (2000) and Talisse (2009). Talisse's talk on epistemic democracy can also be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hx147Cwnrew

27. It should be noted that deforestation had occurred in the region for a while already. The principles of sustainable harvest had been abandoned by the 1980s, and "old growth" trees were decimated as a result.

28. It is here that I wish to thank Julia Lesage and Chuck Kleinhans for their valuable and detailed observations about the demise of the timber industry and the complexity of its long-term causes and effects.

29 https://paginasparaclarinha.wordpress.com/

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Talkin' to us: *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes*

by Julia Lesage

from Jump Cut, no. 5, 1975, pp. 3-4
copyright *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 1975, 2004, 2016



Jost faces the camera and speaks, defining *me you* and *it*; he thumps his chest for *me*, points at the camera for *you* and says of it, the spool in the background, "*it's* where it is." He then goes on to define language and give information about his and our discourse communities—"in all likelihood" American, middle class, college educated, white."

Jon Jost's *Speaking Directly: Some American Notes* is a feature length autobiographical essay or, as the title indicates, cinematographic notes giving a personal and political reflection on contemporary U.S. life. In particular, Jost examines the relations between our personal lives, U.S. international politics, the media, modes of discourse, and our relation to our geography, our towns and landscape.

The film is divided into two major sections: I-THEY and I-YOU. In the I-THEY half, Jost traces out his and our individual connection to the externals of U.S. life. He traces the geography that impinges on us—Jost's rural Oregon and Vietnam. He examines the concept of home—both one's house and the United States as a whole. And he traces the connections between oneself and the people one knows directly and indirectly—Jost's personal acquaintances, and Kissinger and Nixon.



In a section called *a geography (here)*, Jost praises the mundane, which he says places him close to the spiritual. As he drives around, we hear the car radio playing country music.



He walks around, sometimes with ambient sounds in the background. He may be in an area devastated by clear cut timber harvesting.



In a section clled Home ("home") Jost places himself within the tradition of Thoreau's Walden and also gives an expanded definition of home.



In a home you make your own world, one within your grasp with what you can have in the here and how. Throughout the film, a sense of history, what the here and now means, fascinates Jost.



In the section, "Nation" an animated map of the United States fills in features as the female voice off describes U.S. geography.



Jost uses a 360 degree pan of the desert as one way of describing the nation.



We see the “there” of Vietnam, the artifacts of U.S. culture, Nixon and Kissinger, and U.S. economics and imperialism in images which make us question the media representation of these aspects of our lives, realities which our society makes it so hard to grasp directly. Jost contrasts one’s experience of reality with the reified media version of it. Where *Speaking Directly* works the best, we not only criticize



In a section called "People I Know (indirectly)" Jost traces the construction of abstractions such as political figures and foreign policy, and the resulting concrete actions from those people and policcies that lead to real maiming and death.

the media versions but also question our and others experiences.

The film explores epistemological questions in a political way. We see Vietnam, for example, in a series of grainy, colored film loops of U.S. bombing raids, some of which seem more like lovely patterns of color than actual records of the destruction of lives.

In this sequence two voices-over read the “objective” and the “subjective” history of Vietnam: the dates and events of U.S. involvement there and one Vietnamese woman’s prison diary. This ten-minute, looped film sequence visually parallels the mechanistic repetitive Vietnam war. But even when we hear a voice tell us of actual suffering, which the Vietnamese have lived as a reality for over 25 years, our experience of Vietnam is the media one. Vietnam is always our “there.” As a French film collective said when they made a film on the subject, we are always “far from Vietnam.”





In the looped images, U.S. planes fly covering the Vietnamese counrtyside with defoliant. On the ground, the devastated land.

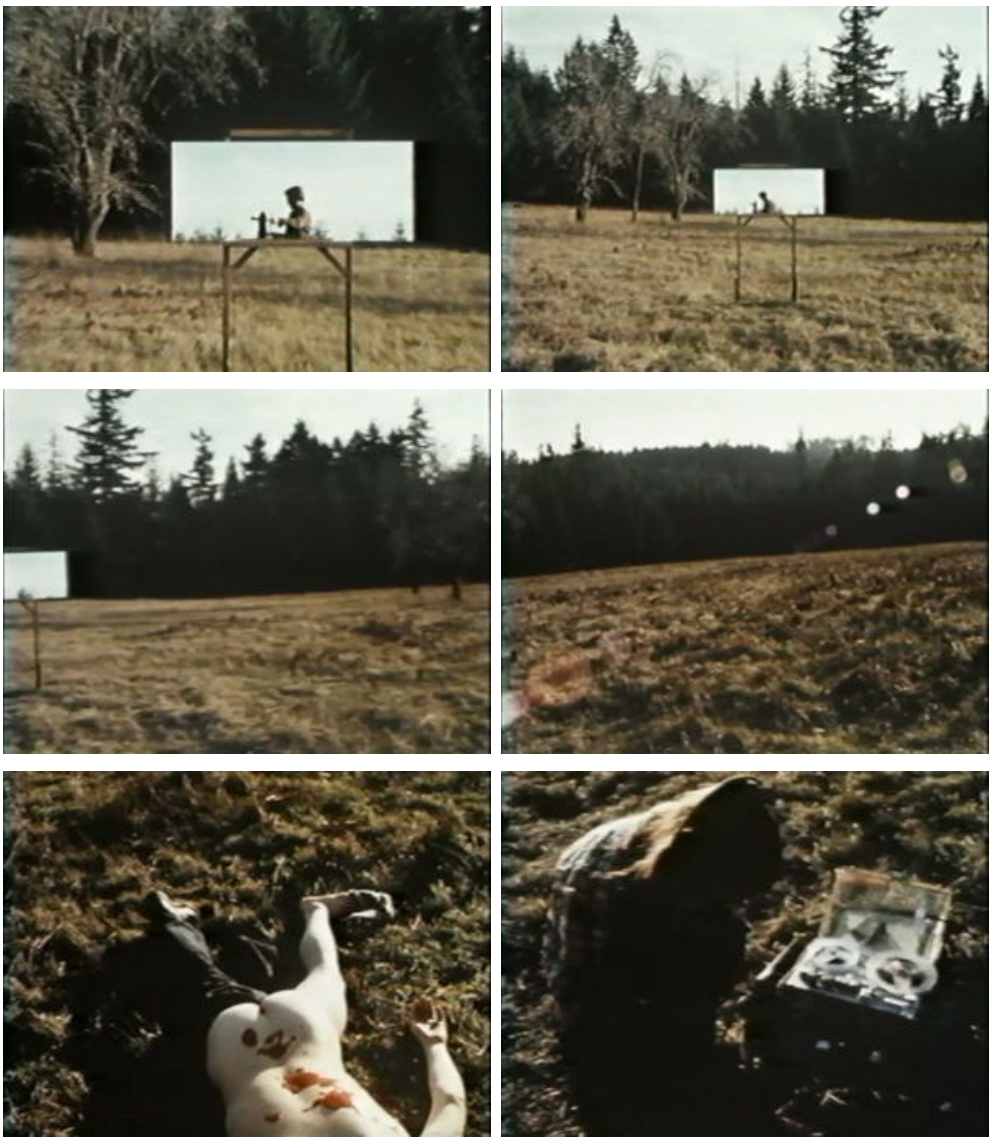




The bombs dropping and hitting targets in images of cruel beauty. Watching them over and over, we may begin to think of the destruction below.

Jost returns to the topic of Vietnam in a long section entitled JON (I) where he explores the relation between his own personal history and that of the United States, a relation which he defines as schizophrenic. Most of the section consists of one long shot-sequence. It opens with a close up showing Jost facing us, standing behind his camera filming. With his hand on the zoom lever he enlarges the perspective. Suddenly we realize we have been looking in a mirror. The mirror stands on an easel in a field with trees in the background and gives an image of the top half of Jost’s body plus the camera. The commentary comes from Jost in voice off. He defines his schizophrenia as the huge disjunction between what he knows in a factual, intellectual sense and what he feels in an emotional, intuitive one. In particular, standing herein a field in Oregon gives him little sense of being American. He does not feel a part of any community. As he says, all we are given to bind us together as Americans are empty televised rituals, either official ones

like inaugurations or unofficial ones like World Series.



As the camera pans right in a series of starts and stops, we see a landscape of yellow stubble, pine trees, and sky. Sun spots stream into the lens, and the horizon is slightly skewed. Against this empty background Jost discusses his own negative experience of being an American, and he says that most people he's talked to have felt the same way. When the returned prisoners of war said, "I'm proud to be an American," it seemed a posture.

> "They speak of America and I am a part of America, and yet I do not feel that they are talking about me or even for me."

For Jost, his personal relationship to United States includes his relations with Americans, especially his friends and us, the audience. When he went to prison for refusing the draft or when he makes home brew, he's felt United States as some fixed thing outside him. Yet his identity as American is something that comes both to and through him.

> "If only to the smallest degree, America is the America I enact, just as I am the person I enact. And this is where I become schizophrenic."

With the latter words the camera tilts down to a static shot of a pale naked male body lying on the grass with splotches of red paint on it (we do not see the head). Jost switches from his subjective feelings about being an American to those

objective realities which touch him every day. We live, he says, with a litany of proper names, a litany of political atrocities: Vietnam, Kent State, Jacksonville, George Jackson, Fred Hampton; or, from a past generation, Guernica, Nagasaki. He calls these proper names which represent realities,

> "a grim poetry sprung from the coils of history from the darkest corners of the human situation: Auschwitz, Belsen-Belsen, My Lai ... But poetry deceives. While touching our souls, it seems to leave a loophole through which our understanding can escape."

We experienced the Vietnam war in this abstracted "poetic" way—with the flickering TV images of small men in pajama-like clothes, the Pentagon Thursday night announcements, and a new language cluttering our mind with words such as pacification, defoliation, and protective reaction strikes. This "poetry of Vietnam," like that of all the mass media, Jost insists, is not just a problem but a system. The United States is an imperialist economic system. But to speak of imperialism or Vietnam only in terms of economic statistics or numbers of corpses does not bring about an understanding which changes our lives. We also have to examine these things in terms of ourselves and our own lives.

When Jost turns the political discussion to the level of his own concrete experience, first we see the "corpse" on the grass visibly breathe. Then the camera swings right to show Elayne Ketchum doing the sound with a tape recorder on the grass. Jost says that when he considers the political dimension of his own life, he is disturbed; it is all thrown into confusion:

> "I am able to make a film largely because I am from a certain class and racial background ... because somewhere other people work in factories and mines."

And he knows that when he is making a film, he oppresses the people he lives with, both Elayne, whom he conscripts into his projects, and her little girl, Erinn, for whom he has no time. He becomes tense and picks at his beard, hair by hair, and eats it. Within *Speaking Directly*, Jost questions the activity of making even a radical film like this one, for he sees that in his case it means being from a privileged class, exploiting workers, distorting relations with those he lives with, hustling, and indulging in the kind of public relations hype he criticizes in the film itself. This is the accepted pattern of life of most of the people around us. we have to question the world where such things are everyday, normal realities.

> "Just as I've seen in my own life that my relationships are often dehumanized and incomplete, the situation I live in engenders that kind of behavior ... a situation symbolized by the sound: Vietnam."

Jost calls, "Cut." We see Elayne turn off the tape recorder. The camera retraces its route: over the corpse—now scratching itself—across the field, and back to the easel where, in the mirror, we see Jost filming himself.



This sequence contains elements of the entire film. Visually, a shot of a bloodied nude figure symbolizes Jost's schizophrenic attitude toward his own person, his own sense of identity as an American, his feeling of isolation. At the same time, it is a visual representation of the corpses of Vietnam. The easel in the field reminds one of Wallace Stevens' vase in a field. A human artifact in nature interprets or "makes sense" out of nature. Jost uses much of the natural Oregon landscape around his home in the film and comments on it. But he never assumes that nature has an intrinsic meaning to communicate to us. Rather his shots comment on the human use of the environment. Jost films himself in the mirror. When he looks in the mirror he sees a filmmaker, but he is cut in half visually by the mirror, is not a reflected whole. Even as a filmmaker, he enacts a role, and his identity is not a whole—although making films is what organizes and gives meaning to his life.

At the end of the film, Jost lays out his equipment for us to see. He says that when he is making a film, he expect his home to revolve around his project, so that his personal relations become dehumanized and incomplete.

Elayne does the taping. By this image Jost implies that he is using her by recruiting her into a project which is basic for his identity but not for hers. In a later sequence with Elayne, the HER sequence in which she is supposed to define her relation with Jon, Jost makes this point clearer. After several false starts of trying to define herself while being filmed, she finally speaks the script Jost wrote for her. Although Jost's version of Elayne's life is probably not an inaccurate one, his point is that we (and Jost would say, especially a male artist) use the loved one to act out our script. For us, loved ones are our version of them and not just themselves.









Four different attemps to film Elayne. She says men and women are completely incompatible, have different notions. She would have to generalize too much to say how she feels about things. Finally on the fourth take Jost has her read a script, which does not turn out well. She walks out of frame and we see her through the window, cutting wood.



Elayne cuts wood, with daughter Erin.



Jost speaks: all this we tell about us can only be a second-hand experience for you. The film then proceeds to have Jost tell his personal history and raise the issue of the relation of narratives to identity, which becomes a summary of what's going on in the film.

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Jost incorporates much Marxist analysis into *Speaking Directly* but his emphasis is not on collective political struggle. He almost ignores the institutional mechanisms by which change could be brought about. Principally, Jost wants us to struggle against reification, which falsifies, disguises and hides reality and distorts our individual relation to that reality. He tries to use film to break through reification, particularly the falsifications inherent in conventional uses of the media, and to speak directly. Like Godard and Gorin in their post'68 films, Jost often uses flat images, rejects traditional narrative structure and the linear development of a single argument, and makes the sound track carry the burden of conceptual meaning. To speak directly to one's audience in a film is a more difficult task than most of us imagine. How can the filmmaker escape from the conventions of cinematic fiction? How can he/she make a film honestly and not create a distortion of oneself, one's friends, one's historical situation, and one's experience? Especially if the filmmaker's own experience is already full of media distortions which he/she must present if the autobiographical and historical picture is to be complete.

The film constantly evaluates conventions of discourse. In the political sections of the film—on Vietnam; on Kissinger and Nixon; on consumption, national "culture" and the industrial-military complex; on advertising images of masculinity and femininity—the visual images are taken from television, military films, advertisements, and photojournalism. The audience readily grasps the implied visual comment on these images as modes of discourse, and this comment is frequently made explicit on the sound track as well. Similarly, voices off read dictionary definitions of language, nation, culture, economics, woman, man. They give definitions of U.S. imperialism and the military's role in it. They present geographic and demographic statistics. These definitions convey both the value and the limitations of the institutionalized vocabulary that we use to convey knowledge.

In many of the shots, the visuals comment on filmmaking—on frame, depth of field, the filmmaker, the audience, the equipment used, the act of filming, the writing of a script. One of Jost's primary concerns is to demystify the media, especially film.

Reacting against the mystification of thinking of film as Cinematic Art, he eschews much of what has traditionally been considered cinema's expressive means. These include emotional uses of lighting, camera movement and movement within the frame to convey a mood or "tell a story," invisible editing, editing for tension, visual continuity from shot to shot, dissolves, etc.. The main cinematic device he depends on is the use of shots for their symbolic and iconic value. That is, x-shot represents an idea, or x-shot tells us something about cinematic process. *Speaking Directly* teaches about film in many ways. It explores the physical process of making a film and the social, economic, and political process in which filmmaking in the United States is embedded. The lessons on cinematic discourse are generally witty. At one point, Jost stands in a field facing us and traces his finger around the edge of the frame; then he pulls down a would-be screen and blacks out the image.



Most appealing in the film are the autobiographical sections. Jost, as we have seen earlier, will not separate his personal history from the history of his time. As Part One of *Speaking Directly* is subtitled I-THEY, some of the people among those in THEY are Jost's acquaintances, presented to us in a section entitled "People I Know Directly." (Following it is "People I Know Indirectly," with news photos of Kissinger and Nixon, and Jost's discussing images and realities of power.) In "People I Know (Directly)" we see Jost's card file of the people he sends mail to, a photo of his parents, pictures and live shots of friends and lovers he's had a falling out with, those who do not understand him, or who are his friends. He shows a shot of the "path to the Martins," some of his neighbors in Oregon whom he didn't see except in emergencies. Such shots of acquaintances presented in a variety of cinematic ways, plus Jost's comments on the parameters of his relations with these people, make us realize the variety of our relations with others. We question the degree to which we contact or know others and the social limits of our personal relationships.



Jost's estranged family. His father was a military officer and his mother says she's just a housewife, both of which roles Jost objects to.



Suzanne: a former lover who is paying for most of this film.



The path to the Markhams: Jost only went once, for emergency help.



Erin, Elayne's daughter. Jost says he does not understand children. He has a little conversation with her.



Dennis: "To make a film about non-communication is the act of a charlatan." He tells the viewer to leave the theater as he leaves the shot.

Sometimes the person shown comments about a limited relationship with Jost, such as Jost's landlord or his friend Dennis. Dennis humorously informs the audience that Jost made this film about non-communication, exploitation of others, and the economics of filmmaking. To make a film about non-communication, Dennis says, is the act of a charlatan. In reaction, the audience can either burn this film, since a radical independent filmmaker like Jost cannot afford another print, or they can leave, as Dennis himself does by walking out of the frame. Some of the major motifs of the film—speaking directly to the audience, the economics of filmmaking, one's personal life—are humorously encapsulated in this encounter with one of Jost's acquaintances. This scene provides that kind of resonance characteristic of the best parts of the film, where the autobiographical elements reflect on the social commentary in both a cinematic and directly stated way.

In the I-YOU half of the film, Jost presents his and Elayne's "stories." His was the

section described with the bloodied body on the grass, hers the series of mistakes with Elayne's then reading script plus Jost's summarizing her life. Following these are sections which generalize about being a female and being a male in the United States. The visuals here consist of media images of women; a close up of a man's hand, penis and belly while he masturbates; and a high angle shot of a male body lying on the floor with semen running down the leg. Over each section a voice off reads an objective commentary, which consists of dictionary definitions of woman and man. The dictionary, as we all know by now, reflects the bases of sexism: there only man means "a human being ... the human race."

In the "Female (You)" section, Jost's subjective commentary describes him imagining the woman's role for himself.

> "You: you are confused by a clutter of images you are told is you ... You-Me: You are a woman. I am not. To me you are an image. I see you, I perceive you, but I am not, cannot be you ... What I know of you, understand of you must be through you through me. Your words, my listening. Your movements, my feeling, your reality, my dreams."

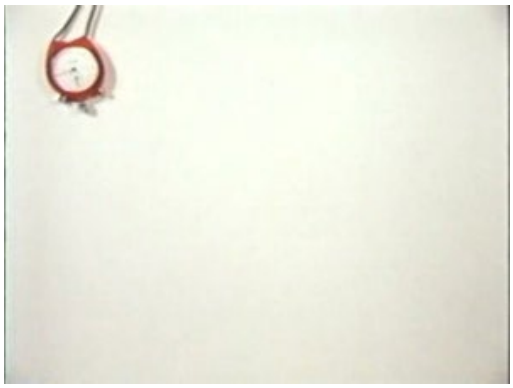
Jost's success in *Speaking Directly* is that he translates into cinematic, political and U.S. cultural terms the age-old theme of autobiographies—the meeting of one person's thoughts and aspirations with historical reality. He effectively relates social and media conventions to psychological repression to larger problems of U.S. imperialism and ideological control. But for me the film had a particularly liberating effect in the way it encouraged the audience to be honest about personal relations. For example, in the masturbation sequence, Jost notes how little of our private sexual reality, our fantasies and masturbation, we bring to a lover, much less to the other "yous" in our lives. He reels off many sexual words that we use,

> "carefully masking the realities which swarm our minds ... When we say 'I,' it is seldom of ourselves which we speak but rather a guarded 'you,' censored, safe, a 'you' to match our castrated 'I.' Of these things, I know just as you know. My dreams are not some exception in an otherwise drab universe. They are also in some form your dreams: my hand, yours, on our genitals."

This is a Whitmanesque eroticism—making love to the audience to bring them to an awakening and reception of the U.S. reality.



Section head: "Male (i)": We do not talk to others, even lovers, about our mundane, frequent acts of masturbation and sexual fantasizing.



Section head: "WE": a five minute shot of a blank screen since Jost cannot touch or speak to us directly.

A daring endeavor, in *Speaking Directly* it is tempered by the cinematic austerity of the film and the audience's constant awareness of the image as an image. We

are not seduced into living out an emotional fantasy inside the film, as in most feature films. And Jost knows and says that he cannot film the audience; he cannot touch or speak to us directly. He gives us ourselves in a section entitled "Viewer (You)," a five-minute shot of a blank white screen with a stop watch running in the upper left corner. When this section came while I was watching the film, people talked to each other, perhaps out of nervousness, but in any case they talked about the film itself. Then on the screen a hand flipped over a transparency of WE to read ME: we complete Jost's autobiography in ourselves.

If one looks at *Speaking Directly* as an Experimental Film, it does not look very Cinematic—no fancy lab work, no secret symbolisms. Nor does it Tell a Story. And though it is heavily political, *Speaking Directly* does not analyze institutional oppression or offer a program or tactics for social change. Rather, it is a film that explores film, personal relations, and communications in general—all in the context of living in the U.S. today. For Jost this exploration necessarily means coming to terms with political reality and attacking oppressive systems. If I were to compare *Speaking Directly* to the Godard-Gorin films—an immediate reaction when seeing the film—Jost's film seems a gentler, more humane, more personable, and very U.S. version of what Godard and Gorin were trying to do in their post'68 work.

It is not, however, an imitation. Jost's own personality and his sense of being an American structure this film. Autobiography has always been a uniquely U.S. mode of expression: authors like Woolfe, Dickinson, Melville, and Plath mined their own experience to write many works. But *Speaking Directly* does not seem to be the kind of film Jost could repeat, for it gives the sense of a personal summing up as he moves from his youth to his mature filmmaking career. The film implies that one must get one's own house in order, end one's own schizophrenia, before one can move out to larger struggles. Jost does not really have a clear perspective on the mechanisms of social change in *Speaking Directly*, and I look forward to his working out these problems in his future films and giving a political perspective that shows both his and the audience's capacity to effect social and political change.

Postscript

September 20, 2016
Eugene, Oregon

Watching *Speaking Directly* recently, some forty years after first viewing, I was surprised how well the film holds up. Although ideological analysis using magazine images has become commonplace in the YouTube era, Jost's techniques for low budget filmmaking have not. Jost's cinematic techniques—such as his judiciously placed long takes, looped images, painterly compositions, and symbolic yet existentially rooted use of landscape—show a disciplined approach to the craft. And both his political analysis and personal self-reflection have flashes of humor and honesty that some other filmmakers working in the genre of the personal essay often lack.

His particular version of discourse analysis that structures the film uses dictionary definitions, often in voice off, which he visually illustrates in ways that give the film a particular U.S. slant, both with the regional local color of his Northwest environment and the major political problem U.S. citizens then faced, the Vietnam War, especially as represented by the media. Jost opposed that war, to the extent of spending two years in jail a draft resister before making this work in the mid-70s. His analysis in *Speaking Directly* tells how he is entangled in history. Noting the ways in which he/we media scholars and media makers, in fact, make history has particular relevance to our own times, when political images/discourse are too often based on market research and the business logic of

capitalism, if not outright deception. In addition, his look at the limits of interpersonal understanding provides him with a wry, questioning approach to character that he would apply in a long succession of feature fiction films.

Speaking Directly still seems eminently teachable. Jost, over long his filmmaking career after *Speaking Directly*, has in a teacherly way written extensively on how to make low budget films, of which he has made many. *Speaking Directly* seems to speak to many viewers—as documentary, autobiography, low budget feature film, political reflection. Now, Hing Tsang's critical writing on Jost inspired me to go back to my older essay and supplement it with images to accompany Tsang's essay on Jost's *The Bed You Sleep In* in *Jump Cut*. In addition, readers will see the many ways that it also fits in with the special section in this issue on 1970s leftist cinema, seen from an international perspective.

Distribution: Jon Jost's films are available through his website at $30 each. <http://www.jonjost.altervista.org/sales.html>

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Special section: 1970s leftist cinema

Introduction

by Joshua Sperling

This special section on 1970s leftist cinema grew out of a conversation that first took shape at the 2012 New York Film Festival. Daniel Fairfax and I were covering the event for Senses of Cinema. Danny and I tend to agree, or at least overlap, in our tastes, but there was one film on NYFF's main slate which polarized us. This was Olivier Assayas' *Something in the Air*: an atmospheric, often dreamy, at times beatific, coming-of-age story about a group of radicalized teenagers in post-1968 France.

On the surface our split reactions were simple. I loved the film and Danny hated it, as our *Senses of Cinema* report indicates. What I saw as a novelistic celebration of youth, Danny felt was an egregious case of leftist posturing. But out of this difference came a longer, and much more nuanced, discussion about the complexities of the historical period Assayas' film explores.

What *Something in the Air* revealed was the sense that the 1970s, with its blind alleys and political stalemates, worked as a kind of prism for the International left. Most activists, including filmmakers, began the decade together. By 1980, many were professors, others were in jail, still others were burnt-out, reborn, back-to-the-land, or had turned corporate. The more we discussed the period, the more we came to appreciate that the mid-1970s were at once the historical pivot-point to decades of political stasis–a stasis only now coming undone–and also a repressed blind spot in the collective memory of the present. It was the last moment when large numbers of young people (civilians) in the affluent countries risked their lives for political values. Yet it was also a period of counter-revolution, when many on the left entered a state of exile, whether real or metaphorical, including the exile of academia. In this, the decade felt to us, children of the 1980s and 1990s, both very near and very far.





Stills from *Something in the Air* (2012), a political coming-of-age film by Olivier Assayas, set in the early 1970s.

In 2015, Danny and I put together a panel on the 1970s for the annual conference

of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies in Montreal. Our idea was to begin an honest yet sympathetic appraisal of the political aesthetics of the period. We wanted to emphasize that it was a decade not only of retreat, but also of transition and renewal, a fertile moment where the doubt and resistance faced by filmmakers helped to shape their work.

The essays collected here have been adapted from that panel. They explore a range of filmmakers and theorists, across a number of contexts. Daniel Fairfax traces the early efforts by *Cahiers du cinema* co-editors Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni to create films in dialogue with the theoretical tradition of the journal. Jose Palacios considers the discursive tensions between resistance and exile among Chilean filmmakers who left the country in the wake of the 1973 coup. And my essay takes up questions of post-Utopian compromise and possibility in the films of John Berger and Alain Tanner.

All of our essays share an interest in the trajectory of political commitment. How does commitment travel across historical watersheds? How does it change across the theory/practice divide? We are not interested in the arrogance of 20/20 hindsight or the sport of assigning a political "score" to a work of art. Instead, we want to reexamine an often overlooked period of sweeping change–a period when many on the left were experimenting with their lives–and locate those political, aesthetic and personal insights, born either of progress or disappointment, still instructive to us today.

There was one presentation from the Montreal panel that, for personal reasons, could not be adapted for this issue. This was Jonathan Mullin's paper on the turn to Super 8 and the everyday among the Italian cultural left. His analysis of Massimo Sarchielli and Alberto Grifi's *Anna* (1975), Nanni Moretti's *Io sono un autarchico* (1976), and unedited footage of the "Convention against Repression" in Bologna in September 1977 from the archives of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), provided a fascinating portrait of an understudied moment in Italian cinema history. His talk also squarely raised the question of post-revolutionary irony, and the humor born of the dissonance between ideology and everyday life.

What Jonathan's talk emphasized applies to the other filmmakers discussed here. In the wake of a monolithic conception of revolution, novel modes of political consciousness became possible. Out of crisis arose new, more personal or experimental, ways of combining art and politics.

A final note. In organizing the panel one of our central objectives was to include a breadth that ranged across the Global North and South. Ideally we wanted a much wider geographic scope—and readers should see this special section as only the beginning of a larger conversation that might travel to other continents and political contexts. We encourage readers to pick up where these essays leave off.

[*Jump Cut* editors note: We're eager to consider other articles on 1970s leftist cinema that continue the discussion begun here.]

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

From film criticism to filmmaking: *La Cecilia* by Jean-Louis Comolli and *L'Olivier* by Jean Narboni et al.

by Daniel Fairfax

Images from *La Cecilia*:



Giovanni Rossi upon his first arrival at the territory that will become La Cecilia.



Overcoming class differences in an anarchist commune: the intellectual Rossi teaches the peasant Tullio about the Earth's orbit around the sun.



Tullio, meanwhile, imparts his knowledge of the land to the proletarian and intellectual members of the commune.

In the summer of 1973, the writers at *Cahiers du cinéma* had reached a dead-end. Their project of developing a Marxist-oriented film theory and critical practice was exhausted. Despite the impressive theoretical work of the years preceding this moment—which yielded key texts such as "Cinéma/idéologie/critique" ("Cinema/Ideology/Criticism"), "Technique et idéologie" ("Technique and Ideology") and "La Suture" ("Cinema and Suture"), among others—their turn towards a Maoist orientation from late 1971 onwards was proving less fecund. In a broader political climate of decline for the far left in France, *Cahiers*' attempt to forge a "revolutionary cultural front" ended in disheartening failure: the gathering intended to launch the front held at Avignon in August 1973, into which the *Cahiers* team had poured their efforts over the course of a year, drew a meager turnout, and discussions at the event descended into sectarian mud-slinging between rival Maoist groupuscules.[1] [open endnotes in new window]

Jean-Louis Comolli, who had been editor at *Cahiers* since 1965, has reflected on the sentiment of dejection prevailing among the journal's core group of contributors at the time:

> "We emerged from the failure of the Revolutionary Cultural Front bruised and bloodied. Afterwards, we met in a bar one evening, we looked at each other, and without needing to say much at all, we all profoundly understood that our will to continue this project had been broken" (Fairfax).

Although he and Jean Narboni had by that point relinquished their official title of editors-in-chief in favor of a less hierarchical editorial collective, the two senior figures at *Cahiers* nonetheless felt they were "morally and politically responsible for the situation"; and so they chose to decisively withdraw from the journal, leaving it in the hands of their younger colleagues Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana.

The history of *Cahiers* since its near-demise is widely known: surviving the turbulent period of the 1970s, the monthly journal continues to appear to the present day. Less well-charted, however, is the subsequent fate of Comolli and Narboni themselves after decamping from an entity with which they had been closely associated since the early 1960s. Notably, both figures shifted their attentions to filmmaking in the years immediately following their departure. Comolli directed his first fiction feature *La Cecilia* (1976), based on a 19th century commune of Italian anarchists in Brazil, while Narboni became a key participant in a filmmaking collective based out of the Paris-VIII university at Vincennes,

which would make *L'Olivier* (*The Olive Tree*, 1976), an essayistic documentary on the Palestinian independence movement.



"An existence overflowing with vitality." The residents of La Cecilia celebrate May 1.

Of course, moving from writing about cinema to making it was already a time-honored tradition at *Cahiers*. The core of the French New Wave was drawn from the journal's ranks, while numerous other critics have used their time at *Cahiers* as a springboard for becoming a director. In the case of both Comolli's and Narboni's projects, however, they decisively repudiated and subjected to critique the auteurist model of filmmaking so stridently championed by the earlier *Cahiers* writers, premised on the near-demiurgic powers of a master-director. Instead, the two films are pervaded by a collaborative ethos—no less present in Comolli's work, despite the singular authorial signature of *La Cecilia*, than in Narboni's film, co-signed with five other participants. Such an emphasis on collective intellectual labor represents one of the key legacies for these two figures of the *Cahiers* project, with its own radical decomposition of individualized approaches to writing on cinema in the years 1968-1973.



Rossi reads aloud the *Critica soziale* editorial condemning the group as dilettantes and deserters.

Undeniably, much separates the two film projects: most notably, they straddle either side of the fiction/documentary divide (although both films will, in various ways, interrogate the validity of this cleavage). Furthermore, whereas *La Cecilia* takes a historically remote incident for its narrative focus, coming close to the genre of the "period drama." *L'Olivier* is preoccupied with intervening in a particularly thorny contemporary political issue. Yet the parallels between the two films are far-reaching. This common ground was symbolized by the fact that the films were both released in cinemas at the same time (early 1976), and were discussed at length in the same issue of *Cahiers* (no. 264, February 1976).

Moreover, both *La Cecilia* and *L'Olivier* critically engage with the tradition of militant filmmaking and the broader question of the relation between politics and cinema, which had been an evident focus for *Cahiers du cinéma* in the period between 1968 and 1973. Coming in a moment of downturn in the fortunes of the French far left, however, this shared undertaking would diverge from many of the precepts of political filmmaking that had dominated Comolli and Narboni's own thinking in their time at the journal. Such a disjunction colored much of the contemporaneous critical reception that the two films garnered upon their release. However, in retrospect, the two projects appear as important stepping stones in the broader development of two of the most significant people in postwar film theory.



Rossi, in Comolli's view, is perpetually caught between his devotion to scientific theory and "the desire of the other."

La Cecilia

Comolli often says his decision to tackle the historical experience of the Cecilia colony, conceived and piloted by the prominent Italian anarchist Giovanni Rossi, came as a direct result of the foundering of the *Cahiers* project. The film's genesis, however, dates to well before this moment: an initial screenplay for *La Cecilia* was completed in collaboration with Eduardo de Gregorio in late 1971.[2] Moreover, although he now considers *La Cecilia* to be his "first real film" (Lleó), Comolli actually had a reasonable level of experience in filmmaking. He had been responsible for television programs on Pierre Perrault and Miklos Jancsó, a documentary on the June 1968 French legislative elections (*Les Deux Marseillaises*, co-directed with André S. Labarthe) and two short fiction films.[3]

Nonetheless, *La Cecilia* was to be Comolli's first fiction feature, and represented—in both aesthetic and logistical terms—a breakthrough for the budding filmmaker. One of a large number of socialist communes founded in the Americas by European émigrés in the 19th century, La Cecilia was founded by Rossi and ten other colonists in Brazil in April 1890. Despite expanding to a population of



On their way to the local store, Rossi and Rocco greet newly emancipated African slaves.



Their journey also leads to an encounter with fellow Italians, but their countrymen continue to toil under an oppressive social system, and there is little that the two groups have to communicate with each other.



Rossi and Rocco are met with hostility by the store's patrons. Comolli's mise en scène – especially the incongruent directions of the characters' gazes – illustrates the class hostility between the anarchist settlers and the local bourgeoisie.

around 150 with the arrival of the original settlers' families, the colony collapsed within four years, and Rossi returned to Italy.

Trained in agricultural science, Rossi considered the commune to have been a successful preliminary "experiment." In his view, despite the class and educational differences of its members and despite the material hardship involved in building a sustainable social unit from scratch, La Cecilia proved that communal, non-hierarchical living was indeed possible in modern-day society. Although La Cecilia was often riven with personality clashes and other contradictions, its inhabitants "led an existence that overflowed with vitality, that trembled with excitement," and Rossi, who wrote a book on the experience, insisted that physical violence never broke out during the colony's existence (*Dossier*, 39).

Despite Rossi's unabated optimism, the initial version of Comolli's project was guided by a critique of, in his words:

> "what we called at the time (1971), in a rather condescending fashion, [...] the 'anarchizing tendencies of the intellectual petty-bourgeoisie'" ("Présentation," 76).

Significantly, Comolli's critique of Rossi's "revolution in a small circle" had *already* been aired by other Italian anarchists at the time of the commune's existence, and in the final film Rossi will even read aloud an opinion article in the anarchist newspaper *Critica soziale* accusing him of dilettantism.

Moreover, as Comolli's project progressed, its critical target changed in nature, a "displacement" related to the shift in *Cahiers*' political orientation over the course of 1972. From this point on, the film would interrogate the broader question of the revolutionary intellectual's role in class struggle. Or as Comolli puts it:

> "The negative character changed: it is no longer Rossi the anarchist (and through him the negative nature of anarchism), but Rossi the theorist, the master of the experiment who arranges matters so as not to be at risk. It is not only politics [...] that Rossi represses, but also the discourse and the body of the other, the desire of the other, about which he wants to know nothing" (idem.).

Perhaps Comolli had always been attracted to the material due to its resonance with his own experience in the theoretical and political cauldron that was the *Cahiers* team in the late 1960s and early 1970s. That is, the journal was cut off, to a large degree, from broader political struggles, and it obsessively focused on internal disputes and the clarification of its "line." But once he had detached himself from the journal, *La Cecilia* much more tangibly acquired the status of an allegory for Comolli's period at *Cahiers*. Looking at the work retrospectively, Comolli acknowledges that

> "in truth, the subject, or the theme, of the film was concealed, since it was really a film which spoke about what had happened in the *Cahiers* group in the months beforehand" (Fairfax).

He even avows, "You can recognize several characters from *Cahiers* in *La Cecilia*" (Lleó).

While it would be relatively unproductive to pinpoint the characters he is



News arrives of the downfall of the Emperor and the advent of a republic. Delivered in Portuguese, the announcement must be translated into Italian for the group by the intellectual Lorenzini.



A stark visual contrast is shown between the communards and the functionary who receives them at the governor's house.



Rossi temporarily departs from the collective to return to Italy, where the bourgeois settings of his lectures on the family and sexuality are once again starkly contrasted to life in La Cecilia.

referring to, it is evident that the figure of Giovanni Rossi is a cipher for Comolli and Narboni's position within *Cahiers*, having voluntarily dissolved their privileged status as editors-in-chief into a broader collective grouping at the time of the journal's radicalization.[4]

Indeed, the question of leadership within far left movements is of fundamental importance in the film. As instigator of the commune and its theoretical driving force, Giovanni Rossi cannot help but play a role as leader, but he remains a character who refuses this role through what Comolli calls "an admirable excess of historical awareness" (Fairfax). At crucial junctures, however, La Cecilia needs leadership, and it is here that Rossi will abrogate his responsibilities to the group he had founded, preferring to play the role of external observer in a manner befitting his scientific background.

More broadly, the film's dynamic is generated by the intersection of external historical forces and contradictions internal to the commune. Here it is noteworthy that even the very establishment of La Cecilia was marked by a curious paradox. After reading of Rossi's earlier attempt at forging an agricultural commune in Italy, the Brazilian emperor Dom Pedro II granted a tract of land in the south of the country to Rossi's group. This contradiction—an anarchist collective owed its existence to the whims of an interventionist monarch—would be key to Comolli's treatment of the events at La Cecilia.

But in his account of the experience, Rossi himself is silent about the nature of the commune's establishment. For the filmmaker, indeed, it is precisely those aspects of La Cecilia existence "censored" by Rossi which form the "motor elements" of the film's narrative. Crucially, in Comolli's view,

> "what Rossi does not see is history, the historical determinations of his time, his present; that is, in the last analysis, the economic and political contradictions in which his project is caught" ("Présentation," 72).

In *La Cecilia*, then, history functions not as an "absolute outside, a master-reference," but as a "causal outside, an outside within the inside, which acts on it, determines it and transforms it in the very process of being repressed by it" (idem.).

Thus, the film is punctuated by incursions of outside history into the enclosed world of the Cecilia commune, frequently depicted through the use of framing and scenographic composition. For example, when Rossi and a fellow communard, Rocco, venture to a general store to buy supplies, they are met with hostility and aloofness from the store-owner and local customers, who see Italian migrants as an unwelcome threat to their standard of living. This economic contradiction forms not only part of the plot—the storeowner sets unfair prices for the two communards—but also the spatial construction of the scene. As a caption in *Cahiers* puts it:

> "The two universes are hermetically sealed from one another, there is no communication apart from the exchange or purchase of domestic products; hence, there are *no* common *visual codes*. Nobody is worthy of a look, nobody is seen by anybody else" (*Cahiers* no. 264, 47).

Similarly, news of the emperor's overthrow and the installation of a republic in Brazil reaches the commune by a Portuguese-speaking messenger boy who





Meanwhile, divisions break out within the commune. The two sides in the debate are depicted as occupying two sides of an abyss in the *mise en scène* of the meeting hall.

interrupts a dinner celebrating May 1. Later, when the group pays a collective visit to the governor's house to discuss the revocation of their title deed to the property at La Cecilia, the contrast between the communards and the functionary they address is multiply connoted. Their working-class dress and impassioned diction stand in contrast to the stiff formality of the bureaucrat who receives them, while their ebullient gestures and movements perpetually spill out over the boundaries of a scenic space that can barely contain them.

It is at this point, however, that the internal contradictions within the group burst out into the open. With Rossi traveling to Italy to give lectures on free love and the abolition of the family, and thus unavailable for guidance, a mass meeting is called to discuss the situation facing the commune. A sharp division arises between those who insist that a vote be taken on sending the group's proletarian members to a government road-building unit in order to pay off La Cecilia's debt to the new republic, and those—led by Luigi, who throughout the film embodies an unwavering, purist attachment to the ideals of libertarian anarchism—who see this as the onset of an insidious form of "parliamentarism." No political common ground exists between the two groups. They are shown facing off against each other from either side of a visual chasm.

From this point on, the commune will be divided along class lines: alternating scenes show those from a peasant background remaining to till the land, while the proletarians and intellectuals perform menial work for the state.



Luigi, the commune's most ideologically intransigent resident, recites a text by Bakunin to a comrade.



Male proletarian members of the group are made to work on road-building details in order to pay off the commune's debts to the state. The alienated nature of this work is palpable, and diametrically opposed to the joyous freedom of La Cecilia's collective labor.

Such a division of labor is deepened by the arrival of the settlers' families in the third part of the film. To the earlier exacerbation of class distinctions is added a restoration within La Cecilia of the bourgeois family, seen by the real-life Rossi as the most formidable impediment to the advent of socialism. While the commune is now materially more secure—its members sleep in large wooden cabins rather than out in the open—it is also more prone to petty squabbling and selfish behavior, as the collective is progressively segregated into smaller family groupings. Rossi, however, is inattentive to these issues, and matters come to a head when Luigi is seen with the peasant Tullio's daughter Angela. The subsequent stand-off results in the departure of a large number of families, leaving behind a small core of members to rebuild the commune.



Luigi's liaison with Tullio's daughter Angela leads to a potentially violent conflagration within the group, and the departure of most of the families.



As the remaining members of the commune take stock of their experience, the settlement burns in the background.

The most overt use of screen space to depict the pressures to which the group is subject, however, comes at the end of *La Cecilia*. In high spirits, the group stages a reading of Georg Büchner's play *Dantons Tod*.[5] Significantly, Luigi plays the character of Robespierre, while Rossi has no role *per se*, instead whispering lines from the text for all the characters—a function symbolic of his relationship to the commune. The intellectual Lorenzini, meanwhile, is given the role of a *sans-culotte* (a lower-class, radical militant during the French Revolution). He declaims, at one point, the revolutionary catch-cry "in the name of the law, there is no law."[6] The others applaud the uncompromising sentiment of the phrase, but Rossi himself stops and looks off-screen. A slow lateral pan reveals—by means of an "irruption of the *hors-champ* [off-screen space]" (*Cahiers* no. 264, 49)—an officer from the republican army standing in the doorway. He informs the inhabitants of La Cecilia that they have been conscripted to quash a nearby rebellion and will be escorted to military headquarters in one hour's time. The group is crestfallen, their dream of an anarchist utopia has been snuffed out by the repressive state apparatus, but it is Luigi—not, pointedly, Rossi—who has the last word:

> "Italy? Why not? Brazil? Why not? Anywhere is fine... But not here. Not like this. Our place is no longer here. There are other things to do."



La Cecilia's final scene: the group performs a spirited recital of *Dantons Tod* by Georg Büchner.



At this point, the Brazilian state's forces of order enter from the *hors-champ*, with the intention of shutting down the commune and conscripting its men.





Luigi, dressed as Robespierre, has the last word in the film. The commune will be abandoned.	Theater as the "dislocation" of the cinematic fiction. Emperor Dom Pedro receives Rossi during a staging of *Nabucco* by Giuseppe Verdi. The scene serves as a prologue to the film.

That *La Cecilia* should end on a theatrical scene was a deliberate move by the filmmaker, and formally rhymes with the film's opening moments, in which Rossi meets Dom Pedro during the intermission of a performance of *Nabucco* in Milan. Here the two characters are framed within a "proscenium arch" formed by the royal box's entrance. The film is thus bookended by allusions to the theater, which, Comolli claims, should be viewed as the

> "toppling over of fiction, as the superposition, dislocation [*décalage*] or unhinging of two representations (the filmic scene and the theatrical scene), one on top of the other, one against the other" (*Dossier*, 104).



La Cecilia is replete with pronounced depth of field shots, whether open vistas such as this image of the valley...

A similar bifurcation of the scene is produced within the shot itself through the use of depth of field. The deep-focus lenses used by Comolli in production yielded images whose multiple layers possessed equal visual clarity. Building on a theoretical discussion already adumbrated in "Technique et idéologie" in 1971, Comolli rejects Bazin's notion that this technique reinforces the "realism" of the cinematic image. Instead, it "theatricalizes the shot," denouncing the cinematic image as an artificial construction, most notably through the production of a "lateral-vertical decentering of the 'subjects'" ("Présentation," 78).

More than a mere "montage within the shot," such an image offers a

> "re-inscription of theatrical space and duration, [...] where the performance [*jeu*] of the actors involves an interplay with the other actors and the elements of the decor, and where the bodies are always captured within a given space and time" (idem.).



...or densely layered composition featuring multiple planes of action all kept in crisp focus.

Certainly, *La Cecilia* is replete with striking depth-of-field compositions, and these are frequently combined with roaming, Jancsóesque long-takes, including one majestic shot early in the film that lasts nearly seven minutes. Formal inventiveness is also evident on the level of sound, where frequent bursts of anarchist song contrapuntally punctuate the film's diegesis,[7] as well as in *La Cecilia*'s lacunary, decentered narrative structure.

Nonetheless, whether these innovations represented a significant challenge to the formal conventions of mainstream filmmaking, as had been advocated by Comolli during his time at *Cahiers*, was a disputed question. Writing for rival film journal *Image et son*, André Cornand states,

> "To say that *La Cecilia* breaks with the habitual working methods, just as it shatters the narrative, to say that it departs from the habitual codes of cinematic representation, amounts to either being ignorant of the cinema or to displaying a certain contempt for everything that has been made in the last few years" (76).[8]



Other, subtler, social divisions arise in the commune: women take sole responsibility for the

From an English perspective, Alison Smith will tentatively agree with this claim, writing that Comolli's chosen aesthetic strategy is "rather a disappointment, or at least a strange compromise, and unadventurous in comparison with the ideals [...] Comolli praised in his theoretical work" (26).[9]

Of further concern for Smith, and in this she echoed earlier reservations aired during an interview with Comolli by the magazine *Ciné-Tracts* after a poorly

education of the settlement's children.



These developments lead to the inevitable splintering of the communal unit into family clans, who engage in gossip and in-fighting.

received screening of his film during a conference in Milwaukee, is the representation of women in *La Cecilia* (Smith, 26-29; Burnett/Vitone, 46).[10] For most of the film, the only female inhabitant of the colony is Olimpia, who is presented in an idealized, Milletian manner as a paragon of swarthy beauty. She forms the object of desire for a number of the colonists, including Rossi himself, who embarks on an "experiment in free love" with her that consumes much of the latter half of *La Cecilia*.[11] In contrast to Rossi's abstract intellectualism, Olimpia embodies an intuitive instinct for the tenets of anarchism, and the portrayal of her character was viewed by many of those in the Milwaukee audience as sexist and outdated. There is certainly some justification to this viewpoint, and it should be noted that a feminist approach to film criticism was never adequately developed by *Cahiers* during Comolli's time with the journal. Comolli, however, contested the notion that his film was sexist, claiming that the audience in question exhibited "a profound lack of understanding of how the image functions" by reading the character on a purely psychological level, rather than as a "logical sign" (Burnett/Vitone, 46).



Olimpia, the only major female character in the film, is depicted in an idealized, quasi-mythological manner. ...



... Comolli inscribes her figure within the codes of 19th-century painting's depictions of women.



A pictorial resonance with the paintings of Jean-François Millet, can also be discerned in other scenes.



Much of the latter half of the film is taken up by the "experimental" relationship between Rossi and Olimpia, which develops in spite of Olimpia's earlier attachment to another character, Alfredo.

The reception the film garnered on the pages of *Cahiers* itself was decidedly more enigmatic. While space was given to Comolli to elucidate the principles behind *La Cecilia*, the film also inspired three reviews—by Serge Toubiana, Serge Daney and Pascal Kané—which all seem to be written in a kind of private code: overtly speaking about the film at the same time as covertly discussing their earlier experiences with Comolli at the journal. Toubiana, for instance, writes about the "trauma" provoked by the group's "encounter with the real" (43), while Daney begins his review with the statement:

> "There is a phrase that one never hears in *La Cecilia*. 'I told you so! I said that things would end badly, that it couldn't succeed'" (52).

Kané, meanwhile, stresses the importance of play (*le jeu*) in Comolli's film (21-

24); when looking back retrospectively at the film, this is also the aspect of the film that the director himself emphasizes. Although he used professional actors, the nature of the shoot led to a jubilant spirit of freedom and improvisation reigning on the set, such that, in Comolli's view, "the little troupe of actors and technicians unwittingly became a homologue to the pioneers of this anarchist commune" (*Corps et cadre*, 353).

In the process, Comolli's own position as director was transformed, to the extent that he came to see all the participants, himself included, as equal collaborators on the project. This was partly, he retrospectively claims, an unforeseen consequence of his own inexperience on set:

> "I was the young rookie—although I was nearly 40—in a film where I did not comprehend what was going on, with actors who I could not understand (in reality, they directed me, rather than vice versa)" (Fairfax).

After completing *La Cecilia*, Comolli would turn to a more conventional fiction film with *L'Ombre rouge* in 1981, but since then his filmmaking has largely focused on documentary work, yielding a corpus of more than 40 films. His experiences of improvisational cinema when making *La Cecilia*, however, have been formative for his later documentary films. In fact Comolli refuses to make a clear-cut distinction between the two forms: just as every fiction film can be viewed through a documentary lens, so too does every documentary possess its share of theatricality and artificiality. Moreover, the history of anarchist politics has been a long-term preoccupation for Comolli, and has yielded the film *Buenaventura Durruti, anarchiste* (1999) and an unmade project on Paris Commune leader Louise Michel. And yet Comolli has never fully identified as an anarchist, stating he is "not a partisan, not even a fellow traveller" of the movement (*Voir et pouvoir*, 467).

Instead, his attraction comes from another affinity: that between anarchist politics and the cinema itself. For Comolli, anarchism's contradiction between "the logic of the individual and the logic of the group, between singularity and collectivity, evokes the matter, the fuel, of cinematic narrative" (468). Discerning this kinship, then, is perhaps the true legacy of *La Cecilia* for Comolli's later, theoretically inflected filmmaking practice.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

L'Olivier

Images from the film L'Olivier:



The events at the Munich Olympics in 1972 were obsessively reported on by the television media, but in *L'Olivier* the Munich events were confined to an opening prologue, which consists of a montage of clips of the television coverage itself. Newspaper headlines are held up for the camera...



...respected intellectuals such as Louis Leprince-Ringuet are quizzed about their views...

Narboni's route towards filmmaking would be more circuitous than that of his colleague. Whereas Comolli had progressively turned towards filmmaking since the late 1960s, Narboni's efforts were focused on teaching. From 1970 on, he maintained a regular appointment at the "experimental" campus located in the Bois de Vincennes (Paris-VIII), established as part of the re-structuring of the French higher education system following the student revolt of 1968. Narboni was involved in the founding of the film studies department at the university—a radical step in French academia at the time—and it was through his teaching activities here that the critic became acquainted with the individuals who would come to make *L'Olivier*: Ali Akika, Guy Chapouillié, Danièle Dubroux, Serge Le Peron and Dominique Villain.[12] [open endnotes in new window]

The origins of the project came from Akika, an Algerian militant who had travelled to Jordan in 1969 and taken photographic slides for use at activist meetings in France; perceiving the limitations of this method, however, he met Le Peron at Vincennes to discuss the possibility of making a film on the subject ("*L'Olivier*," 12). Soon a group of six collaborators had coalesced during the Avignon conference in August 1973—at the same time that *Cahiers* itself became mired in internecine recriminations. In a trip to Turkey, the collective travelled by car to Lebanon, making contact with Palestinian filmmakers and fedayeen fighters. Two years would pass between this moment and the completion of *L'Olivier*. The phases of the filmmaking process were coordinated with the demands of the academic calendar. The filmmakers dedicated the 1973-74 school year to archival research and initial contacts with European anti-Zionist activists. July and August of 1974 saw further trips to the Middle East, where the bulk of filming took place. Finally, they used the 1974-75 school year for gathering additional footage in Paris and transforming the eight hours of rushes into the final 85-minute edit.[13]

The impetus to make the film came from two primary considerations. Firstly, of course, there was the political situation in Palestine itself and its resonances for the European far left. The group took up the project in the aftermath not only of the Black September massacres in Jordan in 1970, which decimated the Palestinian resistance movement, but also the hostage-taking at the 1972 Munich Olympics, which unleashed a wave of anti-Arab sentiment in Europe. This context is provided in *L'Olivier*, but mostly in a discrete prologue that uses television news footage to summarize the prevailing media discourse around the Munich massacres, shown as a counterpoint to the position that the filmmakers aim to relay in the rest of the film.

Additionally, the *cinematic* context at the time the film influenced the makers. Notably, 1973 saw the release of Claude Lanzmann's *Pourquoi Israël*, a propaganda film justifying the existence of a Zionist state in historical Palestine. While critiquing the film for "completely excluding the Palestinians," the Vincennes filmmakers were careful to avoid conceiving of their film as a unilateral retort: "We had no wish to remake the Lanzmann in the opposite direction, that is to say, by excluding the Israelis" ("L'Olivier," 14). Instead, Lanzmann's work was subject to a *cinematic* critique, as Narboni explains:



...and iconic images of the events are broadcast *ad nauseam*. After this prologue, the question of international terrorism will not be a focus for the filmmakers.



In the relative absence of an explicatory voiceover, several extended sequences in *L'Olivier* feature entire families being interviewed together, with their multiple interjections turning into a choir of on-screen voices.



Archival footage of World War II and the Naqba was also used to provide historical context in the film.

> "During the screening of *Pourquoi Israel* I was haunted the whole time by the insistence of a question absent from the film. [...] This question is quite simply: where am I? [...] What is this place from which I have obtained this frame, and at what price? What power pre-existing my own has permitted it? What new power effects does the place that I occupy authorize, and on whom? This is a question which [...] in all good conscience, Lanzmann does not even glimpse" (15).

The most striking example he gives of this problem in Lanzmann's film is a long-shot of the Wailing Wall:

> "What technical tour de force made it possible? Lanzmann's genius, the skill of his cameraman? No, or not only. Rather, that of the Israeli administration which, since 1967, cleansed the surrounding Arab neighborhoods, and without which the filmmaker would never have been able to afford himself such a depth of field" (idem.).[14]

The film stands in opposition to the Zionist viewpoint on the Palestine-Israel conflict—summed up, in Dubroux's view, by then Israeli president Golda Meir's statement that "the Palestinians do not exist" ("L'Olivier," 12). Another key aim in making *L'Olivier* is to provide an alternative to many of the received norms of early 1970s militant filmmaking. This cinema had already been a target for criticism by Narboni and his fellow *Cahiers* writers during the journal's Marxist-Leninist period, but the reproofs would change in nature with the journal's re-alignment after 1973. Whereas the earlier *Cahiers* called for a "critical de-construction of the system of representation" (Comolli/Narboni, 256)[15] governing both commercial and militant filmmaking, their later interrogation of political cinema would focus on more humbly concrete aspects of cinematic form.

When pressed on the matter by Serge Daney, Narboni admitted that "a certain type of political cinema made since 1968 was no longer possible" specifying that it was the "disdainful insouciance towards formal questions, considered as 'bourgeois,' [...] the catechistic tone, the artificial optimism and the denunciative droning of the voiceovers" that rankled in these films ("L'Olivier," 18).

He noted in particular that a work such as *Revolution Until Victory* (1973) by the Newsreel group (a New York-based collective founded in 1967 that made militant documentaries and agitational films), despite being a "penetrating, admirably assembled" work, was nonetheless "suffocating, so rapidly did the information, dates, citations pass by" and felt that such an approach only led to "stunted, sterilized" discussions after screenings of the film (24). In contrast, *L'Olivier* is largely free of a voiceover—which, when it does come, is succinct and softly spoken—and relies mostly on interviews with activists and Palestinians. Care was taken to ground these voices in the context of their day-to-day existence. We thus see lengthy sequences where entire families are interviewed together, and other passages show Palestinians returning to their bombed villages or reminiscing about the olive groves of their childhood.

A key influence on this revamped critique of militant cinema came from a familiar source: Jean-Luc Godard, whose Groupe Dziga Vertov films made between 1969 and 1972 had been held up as exemplary by *Cahiers*. By 1976, however, he had released *Numéro deux* (1975) and *Ici et ailleurs* (1976), and both films had an

enormous impact on both the *Cahiers* group and the Vincennes collective.[16] *Ici et ailleurs* in particular, taking the Palestine resistance movement for its subject matter, was of obvious resonance for the makers of *L'Olivier*: Godard had travelled to the Middle East in 1970 with the aim of making a film confidently asserting the imminence of a revolutionary victory for the PLO, only to witness the Black September rout.



Ici et ailleurs was of immense importance for the *L'Olivier* filmmakers, in particular the film's recurrent metaphor of the "sound being too loud" (that is to say, the voiceover dominating the content of the images). The metaphor is here depicted with an image of the volume dial on a stereo system.



Godard's trauma at having heard fedayeen speak of their impending death, while their voices are overshadowed by the sententious revolutionary rhetoric of their official translator, palpably resonated with the Vincennes group's own project.

Five years later, the finished film would instead interrogate many of his earlier presuppositions, not only with regards to the dangers of unmeasured revolutionary optimism but also concerning his own cinematic methods, in particular the deadening effects of a peremptory voiceover determining the manner in which the film's images should be interpreted by the viewer. The presiding metaphor of *Ici et ailleurs* that "the sound is too loud" was chillingly exemplified in its concluding passage, in which Palestinian guerrillas criticize their command for leading them to certain death. The images had been captured on film, but Godard only belatedly realized their import during the editing of the film, because the filmmaking team's official translator had rendered their anxious concerns as blithe revolutionary slogans.



Care was taken to avoid an "ethnological approach" in the film, but an emphasis is still placed on the specificity of the struggle in the Middle East, and the bond felt by the Palestinian people with their territory. Here, a man walks amid the ruins of his home village.

A similar—albeit less historically dramatic—transformation in the conception of *L'Olivier* occurred during the film's production process. Le Peron notes that the schematic nature of their initial project, which inscribed the Palestinian struggle into a broader global movement against imperialism (equating the Middle East with events in Chile, Vietnam and other post-colonial countries), came to be rejected. Instead, the filmmakers adopted a framework emphasizing the "specific difficulty of the Palestinian problem" and focusing as much on the daily life of Palestinian families as it does on more directly political matters ("L'Olivier," 16). Far from veering into a "suspect descriptivism, an ethnological approach," Narboni viewed this method as the "struggle between a dynamic, ample conception of politics and a fossilized, bureaucratic point of view on the question" (32).

Notably, too, the filmmakers refuse to reduce the issue to that of a national conflict, and much of the first half of the film comprises interviews with Jewish anti-Zionist activists in both Europe and Israel, ranging from young Maoist militants to elderly Jewish Auschwitz survivors.[17] In this sense, one of the totemic images of the film shows two members of the far left group Red Front—one Jewish, the other Arab—led from a prison van into a courthouse by the Israeli



In one passage, from which the film takes its name, an elderly Palestinian woman recalls the olive groves of her youth, before her family's expulsion from their plot of land during the Naqba.

police, their legs manacled together. Regardless of nationality, this pregnant image suggests, the Zionist state is ruthless in its repression of those who resist it.

Another, more ambiguous, expression of Arab-Jewish unity was addressed by Narboni. During the shoot, the group interviewed a young Algerian migrant in Gennevilliers who justifies his belief in the possibility of peaceful coexistence between Palestinians and Israelis by inaccurately claiming that Jews were originally descended from the Arab people. Noting the potential "catastrophe" that arises when an interviewee "'gets it wrong,' utters false ideas with respect to the line taken by the mini-apparatus constituted by the filmmaking team," Narboni argues that there are two dominant approaches taken by filmmakers in this situation.



A totemic image for the political standpoint of the *L'Olivier* filmmakers: Jewish and Arab members of the Red Front group, shackled together at the legs, are led to an Israeli courthouse for sentencing.



Israeli left-wing anti-Zionists were also given a prominent voice in the film.

Either they can take a "sociological, objectivist or neutralist approach" and retain the entire sequence out of respect for the "complexity of the real," or they can adopt a "militant, vigilant" stance that would "censure, redress and rectify" the passage in question either by cutting it entirely or smothering it with the "correct" authority of a voiceover. Against both of these positions, Narboni advocates a strategy that would highlight the "accent of truth" of such a moment (in this case, its prevailing sentiment of international solidarity) by "inscribing this scene in the economy of the film in such a way that this accent is rendered" ("L'Olivier," 27).



French solidarity with Palestine is shown in a number of scenes: flyers advocating the Palestinian cause are printed by mimeograph...

Although the Vincennes group were wary of the premature triumphalism of much militant filmmaking, a cautious optimism is nonetheless discernible in the film, one which comes less from a resolute belief in the inevitability of a victorious revolution and more through a portrayal of the ways in which everyday life has *already* been transformed by the mass mobilization of the Palestinian people. In particular, the role played by Palestinian woman within the resistance movement was a major concern for the filmmakers. While the film includes a segment showing PLO leader Yasser Arafat addressing a congress of the Union of Palestinian Women, it is the footage depicting the activities of Palestinian women themselves that is of greater interest.[18]



...a march in Paris to commemorate the death of Mahmoud Hamchari (PLO envoy to France) at the hands of Mossad agents...



...and interviews with French militant farmers, who describe their solidarity with the Palestinian cause through a common sense of belonging to the land, even after being expelled from it by state authorities and the forces of capitalism.

Often these are the wives or mothers of male fedayeen, but one sequence in particular shows a group of young Palestinian women from a Lebanese camp, probably in their mid-teens, sitting in a circle wearing battle fatigues and holding Kalashnikov rifles. A standard liberal viewpoint could very well decry such a scene as a deplorable example of the use of child soldiers by an unscrupulous armed movement, but the makers of *L'Olivier* chose to highlight the "accent of truth" in the scene, which comes through both in *what* the young women say—they speak of their visions of a future, liberated Palestine in paradisiacal terms, despite having never set foot in their homeland—but also in *how* they say it. Their words are free of the deadening jargon of many militant groups, and, at first hesitant, they soon gain the confidence to give free reign to their reveries. It is almost as if the process of political awakening is taking place before the spectator's eyes.[19]



This young Algerian migrant justifies his view that "on a human level, Jews and Arabs are the same" by incorrectly stating that the former are descendants of the latter. Despite the inaccuracy of the claim, the filmmakers still found it was warranted to include this passage in *L'Olivier*, but felt the need to inscribe it into the "economy" of the film in such a way that the "accent of truth" in his anti-racist declaration was stressed.

Perhaps the most emblematic image of the film, however, is reserved for its conclusion. Here, a guerrilla fighter being treated after suffering injuries from an Israeli attack is lying on a hospital bed, his eyes covered in bandages, a bloodied cloth in his hand, and an intravenous drip attached to his forearm. With perfect lucidity, however, he asserts:

> "We thank the progressive forces and peoples throughout the world for their precious support. Zionism disposes of powerful means of propaganda. We need this solidarity to defeat them, for our cause is just."

The contrast with the forced stridency of the perorations preponderant in militant cinema is stark: here we are presented with an image of a bloodied man speaking with immense physical difficulty, but unbowed in his political determination. He represents, as Chapouillié notes, "the image of a Palestinian people that is wounded but fighting" ("L'Olivier," 35).





Yasser Arafat addresses a congress of the Palestinian Union of Women, praising the role of women in the revolutionary struggle.	The wife of a PLO guerrilla describes his torture at the hands of the Israeli authorities.
	
These teenaged fedayeen from a refugee camp in Lebanon speak of their dreams of a future life in a free Palestine.	Later they talk of the rise in political consciousness among Palestinian women as a result of the struggle against Israeli occupation.
	
This boy repeats their sentiment, stating "The land of my country is gold."	These "lion cubs" (young resistance fighters), in contrast, seem to have delegated their voice to a single boy, who speaks of the liberation movement in rote-like jargon.

The reception of *L'Olivier* upon its theatrical release, however, was divided. Following on from the bomb threats made to cinemas screening *Ici et ailleurs*, there were fears of similar attacks, especially given the fact that the film was being shown in a heavily Jewish neighborhood of Paris. These never happened, but the cultural left in France—the film's natural audience—was far from unanimous in their appraisal of the film. *Cahiers* naturally devoted ample coverage to a film made by one of its former editors, and the Maoist French film critic Guy Hennebelle, despite having frequently engaged in rancorous polemics with *Cahiers*, praised it as "one of the most successful feature-length films in contemporary French militant cinema" (122). Others on the far left, however, criticized the film for being equivocal on the question of Palestine's claim to the occupied territories, and even attacked it for offering a "folkloric" and insufficiently political view of the Palestinian struggle.[20]

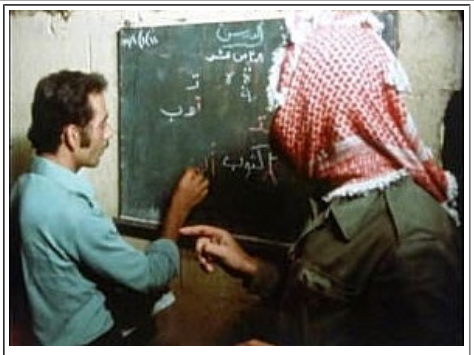
Furthermore, the value of *L'Olivier* for Narboni's later work is less straightforward than *La Cecilia*'s importance to Comolli. Whereas Comolli's film was a foundational experience that inaugurated a forty-year spell of practicing and theorizing the cinema, Narboni would refrain from using his film as a launch pad for a directorial career, and for a long time *L'Olivier* was the only entry in his filmography.[21] Instead, he continued to teach at Vincennes, and would later also return to the fold at *Cahiers*, re-joining the journal as an editor in the late



"The image of a Palestinian people that is wounded but fighting": an injured fedayeen in hospital speaks of the need for international support for the Palestinian cause.

1970s, and establishing its prosperous publishing arm.[22] Moreover, whereas Comolli has remained steadfast in his vocal attachment to radical politics, Narboni has generally shied away from overtly political matters in his more recent writings on the cinema.[23]

Finally, there is the question of Narboni's views on the Palestine-Israel conflict itself. As a Jewish *pied-noir* raised in Algeria, the issue has an obvious personal resonance for Narboni, but whereas during the time of *L'Olivier* he was unabashedly anti-Zionist and in solidarity with the Palestinian cause, more recent texts such as his adumbration of Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* in *Pourquoi les coiffeurs...* and his discussion of anti-semitism and the Holocaust with Godard in the film *Morceaux de conversations avec Jean-Luc Godard* (Alain Fleischer, 2010) evince a greater degree of sympathy with the Israeli perspective. When asked about this matter, however, Narboni did not agree that his views had substantially changed since the 1970s. He continues to believe in a right of self-determination for Palestine—while lamenting the "tragic," seemingly unresolvable nature of the conflict—and he still looks upon his experience making *L'Olivier* in a broadly favorable light.[24]



Care was taken to show the diverse activities of the resistance movement, such as this literacy class for guerrilla fighters.



Images of the Palestinian land and its people were interspersed throughout the film: including shots of the Jordan river passing alongside the West Bank...



...footage of the street life of Palestinian cities such as East Jerusalem...



...and more celebratory moments, such as this wedding dance in Galilee. Narboni rejected accusations, however, that this represented a "folkloric" and insufficiently political approach to the Palestinian issue.

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It may well be true that neither *La Cecilia* or *L'Olivier* would, on a first viewing, be immediately recognizable as the work of film critics who had held up the work of

Godard, Straub/Huillet and the Soviet avant-gardes as the acme of politically radical cinema. Both films, however, can indeed be inscribed within the evolution of their respective authors. Despite taking divergent forms—a historical fiction in the case of the former, and a militant documentary in the case of the latter—the two films are also marked by significant commonalities. While they were made in the aftermath of a moment of defeat and disorientation for the *Cahiers* editors (as well as the far left more generally) and bear significant traces of the reconsideration of radical cinema that this downturn provoked, the two films persist in positing a latent political optimism.

Neither Comolli nor Narboni joined the large numbers of ex-militants and intellectuals who made ostentatious "conversions" to the political right during this period, and their films are testament to their continued identification with the political causes of the left. Both films, moreover, do not refrain from calling into question and interrogating the legacy of militant cinema, and they are both suffused with a collective approach to filmmaking that is of a piece with the overturning of social hierarchies inspired by the May '68 protests.

Most significantly, perhaps, both films evince a profound theoretical understanding of the cinematic image and the uses to which it can be put by filmmakers, resulting from more than a decade's experience of criticism on the part of both figures. Indeed, the lengthy discussions surrounding the two films, printed on the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* in three successive issues over the course of early 1976, offer a fertile intertwining of film theory and its application to practical questions of filmmaking that has few parallels in the history of the cinema. Engaging with these discussions immeasurably enriches the experience of viewing both *La Cecilia* and *L'Olivier*, and it is this imbrication of theory and practice that constitutes the principal value of these films for the field of film studies today.

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Notes

1. For historical discussions of this impasse, see De Baecque, 248-263, and Bickerton, 78-84. [return to text]

2. An early, undated version of Comolli/De Gregorio's script, noticeably different to the completed film, is presently available for consultation in the Bibliothèque du film's archives in Paris under the reference code SCEN492-B145. De Gregorio was briefly associated with *Cahiers* in 1971, but severed ties with the journal in early 1972 along with Bernard Eisenschitz when the editors shifted towards Maoism.

3. Of these works, Comolli now only mentions *Les Deux Marseillaises* in his filmography. The two television programs, part of Labarthe's "Cinéastes de notre temps" series, can be viewed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. The two short films, *Un coup pour rien* and *Comme je te veux* (both 1970), which were made under amateur conditions and never released commercially, are not presently available for viewing. A screenplay for the former film, however, is housed in the Bibliothèque du Film archives, and details a plot concerning two would-be left-wing terrorists who plan to assassinate a provincial industrialist.

4. One interesting parallel is that, as with the original settlement at La Cecilia, *Cahiers* in the late 1960s had only one woman (Sylvie Pierre) in an otherwise entirely male team.

5. Büchner's play (*Danton's Death*, 1835) follows the French revolutionary Georges Danton (a relatively moderate figure) during the 1793-94 "reign of terror," and culminates in his execution at the hands of Robespierre's more radical faction. There is some irony to the use of the play in *La Cecilia*: *Danton's Death* is far from being an unambiguous celebration of the revolutionary zeal of the Jacobin wing of the revolutionary movement, which is the spirit in which the Cecilia group performs the text.

6. Comolli notes that this sentence possesses an "extraordinary violence," and that the chosen conclusion to the film gestured towards "turning the end of the Colonia Cecilia into a larger version of all stories of failed utopias" (Lleó).

7. Comolli felt that the film's music was "the other side of speech, the other sound of the voice, the other voice that is superposed on top of the voice making a speech [*discours*], the other discourse running underneath that of the logos, of ideology, anticipating it or prolonging it" (*Dossier*, 104).

8. Cornand even avers that Rossi's failure is an unintended metaphor for Comolli's own "failed" passage from film theory to direction.

9. Comolli's film was also reviewed in *Jump Cut*, with Reynold Humphries and Geneviève Sizzoni offering their own Marxist analysis of the shortcomings of Rossi's commune.

10. The conference, organized by Stephen Heath and Teresa de Lauretis, was focused on the issue of "Cinema and the Apparatus" and featured contributions by Comolli, Metz and scholars from the UK and the USA, who mostly discussed film from a psychoanalytic perspective. The conference organizers were, however, themselves the target of claims of sexism and elitism, made by, among others, the editors of *Jump Cut* (for a summary of this critique, see Rich/Kleinhans/Lesage).

11. The fictional Olimpia is an amalgam of two figures from Rossi's account of the Cecilia commune: an unnamed individual who was the only female member of the initial settlement, and a later arrival called Elèda with whom Rossi undertook his "experiment."

12. Of these individuals, Danièle Dubroux, Serge Le Peron and Dominique Villain (who was married to Narboni at the time) would become regular critics at *Cahiers* in the 1970s. Dubroux and Le Peron, who had earlier experience in the Cinéluttes collective, would also become filmmakers in their own right in later years. [return to text]

13. The filmmakers note that a 150-minute preliminary edit shown informally was first whittled down to 110 minutes for the film's premier at the "festival du film politique" at Cannes in May 1975. The final cut was released in the Latina cinema in Paris' Marais district in March 1976 ("*L'Olivier*," 38).

14. A political reading of the conditions of the production of film images is also present in Comolli's critical response to the film ("L'image absente," 44-47).

15. The looser, but more widely available, translation by Susan Bennett renders this phrase as "a breaking down of the traditional way of depicting reality" (*Screen Reader 1*, 6).

16. The films were discussed in issues 262-263 (January 1976), 264 (February 1976) and 271 (November 1976) of *Cahiers*. While *Ici et ailleurs* had not yet been released in theaters, it is clear from their discussions that the Vincennes group had seen the film while working on *L'Olivier*. Serge Daney admits to being so emotionally affected by *Ici et ailleurs* that he vomited after watching it (Daney, *Exercice*, 252).

17. These figures include René Raindorf, an Auschwitz survivor and anti-Zionist campaigner, Piet Nak, a Dutch communist who led a strike of workers in the Netherlands against the deportation of Jews to the concentration camps when the country was under German occupation, and Israel Shahak, a Holocaust survivor and president of the Israeli League for Human and Civil Rights.

18. In his speech, Arafat declares his pride in the role of Palestinian woman in the armed struggle, stating, "By taking up arms, the Palestinian woman has forged an authentic revolutionary spirit."

19. Their mode of speech is noticeably different to those of young boys (known as "lion cubs") in a parallel scene: here one boy seems to speak for the entire group, and his summary history of the Palestinian revolution is recited in mechanical fashion, as if learnt by rote.

20. Narboni discusses these criticisms and ascribes them to the viewpoint of "some (French and Arab) bewildered dogmatists" ("L'Olivier," 32).

21. The next (and so far only other) film for which Narboni would take a credit was *À voir absolument (si possible): Dix années aux Cahiers du cinéma 1963-1973* in 2011, co-directed with Comolli. Made for cable television, the film was a retrospective look at their time with the journal.

22. One of the discreet ways in which Narboni has influenced the history of film theory came in the form of his close collaboration with Gilles Deleuze, who also taught at Vincennes, in the late 1970s and 1980s. The cinephilic guidance Narboni gave to the philosopher was crucial to the final shape his enormously influential two-volume work *Cinéma* (1983-1985) would take, and is perhaps one reason for the correlation between the corpus of films Deleuze discusses and the *Cahiers* "canon" of the 1950s-1960s (see Dosse/Frodon, 21-30).

23. The major exception here is his contribution to *Les Années Pop: cinéma et politique, 1956-1970*, a book which also contained texts by Comolli and former *Cinéthique* editor Gérard Leblanc.

24. Jean Narboni, private communication, April 2, 2014 (Paris).

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Resistance vs. exile: the political rhetoric of Chilean exile cinema in the 1970s

by José Miguel Palacios



Compañero presidente, dir. Miguel Littin (Chile, 1971): This was the only feature length film entirely produced by Chile Films during the Popular Unity government. In *Compañero presidente*, Régis Debray—at the time famous for his book on armed struggle in Latin America, *Revolution in the Revolution?*—interviews Allende and questions the foundations of the "Chilean Way" to socialism. In a sequence in Allende's house, Debray asks the president: "With you in power, the Chilean people have chosen the path of revolution. But what's a revolution? It is the substitution of the power of one class by another class. Revolution is the destruction of the bourgeois apparatus and its replacement by another. And none of that has happened here. So, where are we, *compañero*?"

Cinema during the Popular Unity government (1970-3): It is impossible to claim that there was a "cinema of Allende" or a "cinema of the Popular Unity government," if by that we mean a cohesive corpus with unified goals and practices. The films that were produced in those three convulsed years are highly heterogeneous.



Venceremos, dirs. Pedro Chaskel and Héctor

On the night of September 4, 1970, the Chilean people went to the streets to celebrate Salvador Allende, who had just become the first Marxist in the country's history to be democratically elected as president. Allende had to wait until his fourth presidential campaign—his previous attempts were in 1952, 1958, and 1964—to achieve victory, but the workers and peasants, the poor of the nation, had waited much longer for someone like Allende to represent them. An educated doctor, he was not one of them. But they called him *compañero presidente* because for the first time they had a president and a government that they felt were theirs. Chile quickly captured the attention of artists, intellectuals, and politicians throughout the world since Allende's government had a different vision. Known as the *Vía Chilena,* or "Chilean Way," Allende proposed a "democratic revolution" to achieve socialism: a peaceful process of change within the boundaries of bourgeois, constitutional democracy.

Allende took office with an ambitious program of social transformations that included the nationalization of major industries (controlled until then by U.S. corporations) and the redistribution of land to peasants. The experience found immediate resistance from the country's reactionary forces — the upper classes, transnational corporations, conservative guilds and professional associations, right-wing media — and from the U.S. government, which funded the military coup that eventually toppled Allende on September 11, 1973. The "Chilean Way" had to deal with internal opposition, too. The platform supporting Allende — the Popular Unity, a coalition of several parties — was the result of two contradictory positions in the Chilean Left. One thought that the adequate path toward socialism had to be developed within existing legal and institutional structures. The other sought to intensify strategies of "popular power," with the ultimate goal of destroying the constitutional order — thereby making room for the advent of true socialism (Casals 11).

The political fragmentation of the Left at the time found its equivalent in the variety of cinematic responses to the social process experienced under the Popular Unity government. Soon before Allende's election, in 1970, filmmakers wrote a manifesto calling for a revolutionary cinema committed "to the task of our time: the construction of socialism" (Littin 1976: 83). The films produced during the three years of the Popular Unity were heterogeneous in their range of aesthetic and narrative choices. They were mostly produced by artists and production companies outside of Chile Films[1]open endnotes in new window] —the state-owned film production company–and they were often critical of the historical process the country was experiencing. This cinema, far from being monolithic,

Ríos (Chile, 1970): *Venceremos* follows the legacy of Cuban documentarian Santiago Álvarez. An agitational ciné-tract, this short film presents stark images of Chile's social inequalities and ends with the massive celebrations after Allende's electoral victory.



Descomedidos y chascones, dir. Carlos Flores del Pino (Chile, 1972): *Descomedidos y chascones* is an unconventional and humorous portrait of Chilean youth across the social and political spectrum.

International solidarity with Chile: Some posters from the international solidarity movement with Chile, which sought to denounce the crimes of the Junta and boycott its exports, release political prisoners, and raise funds for Chilean groups and organizations fighting the dictatorship.



Various posters from Greece, Canada, Algiers, Italy, and West Germany.

reveals the political complexity of the Allende years.[2] [Since most filmmakers were militants either of the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, or the MIR (Movement of Revolutionary Left), internal partisan debates inevitably permeated their cinematic practice. And so the Popular Unity government saw no homogeneous or unified film program for imagining, capturing, allegorizing, or thinking with and through the social changes that were taking place in Allende's Chile. The discussions grew more acute in the wake of the Coup, insofar as the radicalization of the social and political landscape called for a radicalized or revolutionary cinema. The question of what made cinema "revolutionary" or "political" was up for debate, however, what united Chilean filmmakers was their desire to intervene in the political sphere.

For the military, this made them part of the "Marxist cancer" that had to be eliminated. The Junta, led by Augusto Pinochet, carried out an "internal enemy" doctrine, based on total annihilation of political dissent. The government imprisoned, tortured, executed, "disappeared," and forced into exile thousands of Allende's supporters and leftist militants, including filmmakers. Facing real danger, directors looked for asylum as a way to leave the country and resume their lives in exile.

The large corpus of Chilean exile films produced in countries such as Canada, Cuba, Finland, France, East and West Germany, Mexico, Mozambique, Spain, Sweden, and Venezuela, among others, was possible to a large degree by cinematic networks and practices of solidarity, which enabled Chilean filmmakers to continue making films in exile. In their host countries, Chilean exile filmmakers encountered the solidarity of peers and of strangers. It was a solidarity that had naturally emerged as expression of support to a people going through a unique revolutionary process, but that had been multiplied and transformed after 1973 into a huge worldwide solidarity movement, now in support of a people resisting a military dictatorship. This support was visible in economic boycotts, in street protests, in hunger strikes, and in the creation of "Chile Committee."[4] For exiles, and for exile filmmakers, solidarity became a way of being in the world, providing them with a new range of actions with which to act in the political sphere.

Scholarly accounts of Chilean exile cinema posit the end of the 1970s as a moment of crisis and transformation. Near the end of the decade, most studies claim, Chilean exile cinema moves away from a militant phase and turns to a much more diverse aesthetic and thematic body of films.[5] This narrative needs to be complicated. Most of the early works produced in exile, especially short films, can indeed be labeled "militant." Overtly political, they celebrated the Allende years and denounced the crimes of the dictatorship that took over. But even if the number decreased later in the decade, Chilean directors never ceased making these films. As Zuzana Pick noted:

> "while new thematic concerns and aesthetic strategies characterize the individual filmmakers' efforts, their deeply-rooted commitment to a national and continental history determines how they approach the film medium itself" (1987: n.p.).

Two things are true: by 1975 there were already unorthodox films in their approach to exile and even films that had little to do with Chilean politics, and by the end of the 1980s there were still "militant" films, perhaps with more sophisticated political and aesthetic goals as the dictatorship endured.[6] The evolutionary narrative in which a "cinema of resistance" gives way to a "cinema of exile" does not hold. The teleology behind these accounts is misleading; nonetheless, it is undeniable that the end of the 1970s sees a change in Chilean exile cinema, both in the nature of a large amount of films and in the directors'



Images from Brazil and the U.S., plus a postcard from the Copenhagen "Chile Committee." These civil organizations emerged in almost every country where Chilean exiles lived. Local members of the host society together with exile communities formed them.

These titles constitute early examples of Chilean exile films that moved away from the rhetoric of resistance and solidarity.



Los transplantados, dir. Percy Matas (France, 1975): *Los transplantados* tells the story of the proletarianization of a wealthy Chilean family. In a reverse tale of exile, after the election of Allende, the Valenzuela Barcelós flee the country and go to Paris to live voluntarily as expatriates, but things don't go as smoothly. The marriage becomes isolated, distanced from their kids, and impoverished.

discourse about their exilic practice. The public debates they had in 1979 transpire a feeling of exhaustion and crisis, even if directors avoided recognizing it explicitly as such. What kind of signs can explain this exhaustion?

Exile as a historical and cultural situation—and by 1979 directors had already lived six years under it, a lapse in which they had made around seventy films—demanded new questions, forcing filmmakers to redefine both the "political" and "cinema" as they knew it. What kind of films to make? How to situate oneself as an exile filmmaker in the public sphere? Who to address in their work? How to reconcile two simultaneous and sometimes contradictory desires: the need to hang onto the cultural signs of the homeland while incorporating elements of the local culture of which they were now part?

Obviously, there could not be an homogenous response to these questions, since Chilean filmmakers were working in very different conditions: some made films for State studios in socialist countries, like DEFA in the GDR and Mosfilm in the Soviet Union; some benefited from small programs of multicultural aid or from the support of larger national film institutes, like the NFB in Canada; some developed international coproductions at a continental and Iberoamerican scale, like Miguel Littin; some made their first works while at film school, like Luis Vera in Romania; and some worked independently or formed their own production companies. The ways in which these films were exhibited and how they circulated differed, too. And so did the stories, formats, genres, characters, and topics with which filmmakers worked. But there was still some common ground. Most directors, explicitly or more loosely, thought of their work in relation to Chile and its history, its culture, and its present under a criminal and authoritarian regime. And most conceived of their films as some sort of "intervention" in the political arena. If this was the case, what changed near the end of the 1970s? Why signaling the closure of the decade as a moment of crisis?

In order to answer these questions, I move away from the films as objects of study and center my attention on Chilean filmmakers' rhetoric. In her historical overview of Chilean exile cinema, Pick claimed:

> "for Chilean filmmakers to accept each others' aesthetic and thematic hetereogeneity, they have had to pass through a stage of bitter polemics, declarations about the need to preserve purely Chilean themes, and accusations of political opportunism" (1987: n.p.).

This essay analyzes the rhetoric behind some of those polemics and declarations. I argue that the decade did not see the passage from one phase of Chilean exile cinema to another. Instead, what happened during the 1970s was a struggle between different ways to conceive of the political nature of cinema, especially under the new historical condition that exile supposed. For Chilean exile directors, this debate took place in various gatherings and film festivals, which offered spaces of interaction where filmmakers could overcome their geographic dispersion and isolation. This essay will chart a festival road map that travels from Caracas, Venezuela (1974) to Pesaro, Italy (1974), and then to Moscow, the Soviet Union (1979). I contend that in these events Chilean filmmakers enacted a rhetoric that plays out as an ideological opposition between resistance and exile.



La femme au foyer, dir. Valeria Sarmiento (France, 1975): Sarmiento's first film in France is set within an enclosed space—an apartment in a rich borough in Santiago. There, right-wing women complain about their maids and about Allende's government, they watch *telenovelas* on TV, and they clean obsessively. The only exterior shot is the last one: from across the street, we see a woman smiling by her balcony, while hearing what we assume are the Hawker Hunter jets flying over Santiago in direction to attack *La Moneda*, the presidential palace.

If there are examples of unorthodox political approaches in early Chilean exile films, there are also cases of late cinematic militancy during the 1980s.



Así golpea la represión, dirs. Peter Nestler and Rodrigo Gonçalves (Sweden, 1982): In *Así golpea la represión*, German director Peter Nestler teams up with Chilean exile Rodrigo Gonçalves (even though he signs as Sergio Bustamante for security reasons) to show the work of two organizations that defended Human Rights in Chile.

A film festival road map

Chilean exile directors encountered practices and discourses of solidarity in numerous film festivals and meetings. Although this road map begins with the Caracas meeting in September 1974, two precedents must be noted. The Oberhausen Film Festival (April 22 – 27, 1974) had a special program titled "Solidarity with Chile," in which they screened eleven films about the nation's recent events, including

- GDR duo Heynowski's and Scheumann's *Fellow Citizens, The War of the Mummies*, and *I was, I am, and I will be*;
- Bruno Muel's *Septembre Chilien*;
- the Soviet production *La primera página*, directed by Chilean Sebastián Alarcón (all from 1974);
- and Chris Marker's and SLON'S French version of Littin's *Compañero Presidente* (1971), titled *Ce que disait Allende* (1972).

As Mónica Villarroel and Isabel Mardones noted, during the festival, a group of Chilean filmmakers signing under the name of Chilenischer Widerstand — Kinofront (Chilean Resistance—Cinema Front) issued a manifesto in which they denounced the incarceration and torture of Chilean actors and other members of the film world. They also made an explicit call for solidarity:

> "In the name of all of us who are part of this front, we thank you for the solidarity you have shown us. We also thank you in the name of those who use cinema as an arm of liberation and in service of the revolution. Chile does not give up! *Venceremos*!"

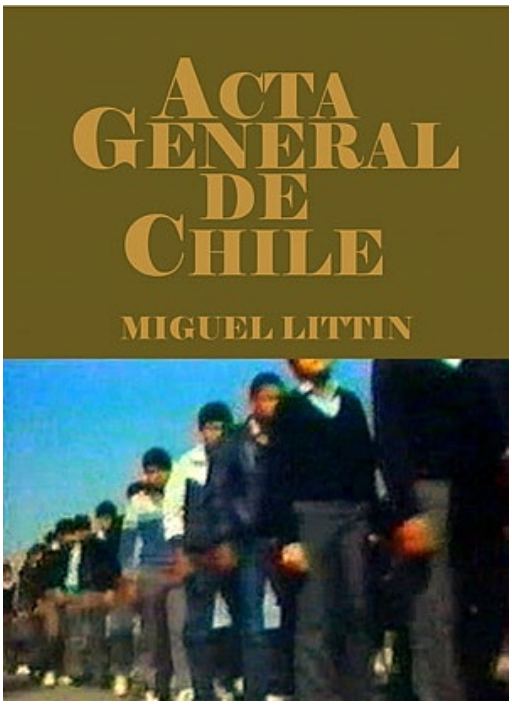
This statement is similar to the "Declaración de Estocolmo" dated February 1st, 1974, which defined cinema as an arm of liberation:

> "We understood it like that under the Popular Unity. Today, we put cinema in the service of the Chilean people in its struggle against fascism" (Villarroel and Mardones 87-88).[7]

The mention of these precedents shows that Caracas, Pesaro, and Moscow were not the only events that demonstrated solidarity with the Chilean cause. But I am highlighting them because they evidence a double continuity. First, the debates over the meanings of resistance and exile that took place in Caracas were developed and reformulated in new ways in Pesaro and later in Moscow. It should also be noted that this ongoing conversation that Chilean exile filmmakers engaged in was prompted by the festival screenings they were attending, and therefore shaped to a certain degree by the curatorial decisions of programmers. The programming in these events was overtly political. Moscow and Pesaro, in addition to other festivals like Leipzig in East Germany, played an important role in the geopolitical map of cinema during the Cold War. Moscow was the major festival of the Soviet bloc and Pesaro, with its annual retrospectives, had become a relevant site in the cinematic relations between Italy and Latin America (Mestman



Chile, no invoco tu nombre en vano, dir. Colectivo Cine-Ojo, (France/Chile, 1983): *Chile, no invoco tu nombre en vano* was the first film of the anonymous collective Cine-Ojo (in 1987 Hernán Castro acknowledged he was the leader of the group). The documentary portrays the social climate of a crucial year in the resistance against the dictatorship—1983, when a series of massive street protests began to shake the regime.



Acta General de Chile, dir. Miguel Littin (Spain, 1986): Littin's *Acta General de Chile* is well known for Gabriel García Márquez's novelized account of its production (*The adventure of Miguel Littin clandestine in Chile*). García Márquez speaks in Littin's voice to narrate the director's performance of a whole new identity. Disguised as a Uruguayan advertising executive, Littin was able to organize a production that involved four international crews that didn't know of each other's existence.

2012: 171). Pesaro's 1974 version, for example, had a special program of Chilean cinema under Allende, showcasing the feature films of Littin and Ruiz. The following version focused on the first films made by Chileans in exile, therefore establishing, as Julianne Burton suggested in her review for *Jump Cut*,

> "a continuing emphasis on Chilean cinema and an opportunity to seriously consider the options and prospects of an exiled film movement" (1975a: n.p.).

The beginning of this festival road map also shows a sense of continuity with the past. Caracas crystallized an accumulation of recent similar experiences—meetings where radical filmmakers from the Third World discussed the challenges of film production and distribution in tandem with their national struggles of liberation and decolonization. In this sense, Caracas, as an event of solidarity with Chile, is unthinkable without previous tri-continental and continental gatherings of filmmakers.

Caracas (1974)

In September 1974, more than forty Latin American filmmakers gathered in Caracas, Venezuela, for the *Encuentro de Cineastas Latinoamericanos en Solidaridad con el Pueblo y los Cineastas de Chile* (Encounter of Latin American Filmmakers in Solidarity with the People and Filmmakers from Chile).[8] I want to note three aspects of this meeting. First, it reaffirmed a particular genealogy of the New Latin American Cinema. Following the events held in Viña del Mar, Chile, in 1967 and 1969, and in Mérida, Venezuela, 1968, Caracas presented itself as the fourth installment in a series of festivals in which Latin American filmmakers defined their practice as a cinema of *cultural decolonization and national liberation*.

Three tri-continental meetings preceded the event in Caracas: Algiers in December 1973, Buenos Aires in May 1974, and Montreal in June 1974. The introduction to the statement issued by the filmmakers attending Caracas, nevertheless, mentioned these meetings only in passing, downplaying the Third Worldist impetus that guided them ("Declaración" 11). Third Worldism needs to be understood here as a dominant "discourse and ideological orientation" (Shohat and Stam 1994: 248-290; Stam 1999: 291) in the cultural and political imagination of the 1960s and 70s. In his study of the Algiers and Buenos Aires meetings, Mariano Mestman defined Third Worldism as "a utopia which allows the grouping together of newly liberated and decolonizing countries within the same project as others which, though politically independent, were perceived as 'neocolonized'" (2002: 51). In Caracas, however, the creation of a specifically *Latin American* Filmmakers Committee—echoing but independent from the Third World Cinema Committee founded in Algiers—thus signaled a move from tri-continentalism to continentalism.

In this shift, the encounter of different peripheries became less important than the affirmation of Latin America as its own center. The recent proliferation of military dictatorships in the Southern Cone had changed the geopolitical landscape. In addition to Chile's 1973 coup, Brazil had experienced its own coup



Poster for the "Encounter of Latin American Filmmakers in Solidarity with the People and Filmmakers from Chile" (Caracas, Venezuela, 1974).

in 1964 and went through a dictatorship that lasted two decades, until 1985. In 1964 as well, Bolivia saw a succession of coups and short military governments, leading to Hugo Banzer's dictatorship—a much more repressive regime lasting from 1971 until 1978. Uruguay faced a coup in 1973, a few months before Chile, and went through a twelve-year dictatorship. And two years after the Caracas event, in 1976, a new coup initiated a brutal military dictatorship in Argentina. Each of these authoritarian regimes tortured, murdered, disappeared, and exiled leftist militants and supporters—a fate that was shared by many politically committed directors from all of these countries.

Under this new context, filmmakers claimed that the Latin American Filmmakers Committee opened an organized front of struggle with urgent tasks to accomplish.

> "Our responsibility is to demarcate, in every one of our countries, the line separating imperialism and its intermediaries from all those forces struggling for true national liberation" ("Declaración" 13).[9]

In this struggle, the Chilean case—with the contested experience of Chile Films as a state-owned film production company, the right wing's ideological control of the media, and the imprisonment, torture, and exile suffered by many members of the film world—served as the most recent and painful cautionary tale for Latin American filmmakers.

Second, as the title indicates, the Caracas encounter was an expression of what organizers called "militant solidarity." The event was planned to coincide with the first anniversary of the coup and with worldwide manifestations to denounce the Junta, with the explicit understanding that "the struggle of the Chilean people is the struggle of all peoples of the world" ("Introducción" 7). "Before filmmakers," the text stated, "we are militants of the struggles of our peoples" ("Documento" 22).[10] In these different invocations of solidarity the term meant concrete tasks: to devise actions of support for fellow exile filmmakers, to integrate them into their respective host nations and film industries; and to organize public campaigns to get Chilean filmmakers out of prison and out of torture centers.[11]

The discursive strategy at work here involves a deep entanglement of resistance and solidarity. One does not produce, or is the cause of, the other; both are intertwined and need each other. Acts of resistance are possible through solidarity efforts but solidarity is only conceivable if it advances resistance. In this rhetoric both concepts are abstractions, hence the need to flesh them out by listing goals and creating committees. Concepts are translated into bullet points with specific goals in order to move from *ideas* of resistance and solidarity to concrete *practices* of resistance and solidarity.

The third relevant aspect of the Caracas encounter is discernible in Miguel Littin's long essay on Chilean cinema and the government of the Popular Unity.[12] Littin intervened by virtue of his triple status: as an exile in Mexico, as the former director of Chile Films during the first year of Allende's presidency, and as one of the newly appointed members of the Latin American Filmmakers Committee. In his talk, Littin explained what he saw as the failures of revolutionary cinema under Allende. He claimed that filmmakers could not turn Chile Films into a "centralized organ with real power" (Littin 1974: 32) and therefore had to deal with the limitations of producing a "revolutionary cinema within the apparatus of the bourgeois state" (33). Littin also introduced an idea that was to become dominant for filmmakers and historians. In the wake of the coup, he argued, the process of class struggle was reaching such a level of acuteness, the acceleration of historical events was such, that the cinematic medium as an instrument in direct service of a revolutionary process became obsolete (Littin 1974: 41).[13] (I will return to the implications of this idea for Chilean exile cinema later in this essay.)



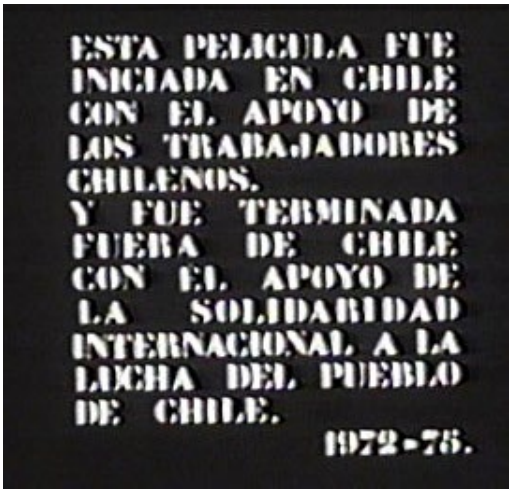
Miguel Littin in 1971.

Littin concluded his speech with a reflection on the role of artists and intellectuals under the current political situation. He mentioned that Chilean filmmakers had organized themselves in a Front of Resistance, echoing the strategies of popular resistance devised by the masses in Chile. Littin proposed a series of tasks to be undertaken by filmmakers throughout the world, which included organizing screening series devoted to Latin American cinema as a way to raise funds for the Chilean resistance, and working to facilitate conditions so that every Chilean exile director could make the film that "the Chilean resistance demands" (1974: 51).

What did this demand mean? In his words, it meant all films that "have as a priority to forge the image of a people in struggle and with faith in victory" and those "that analyze different periods of the life of the country so as to rightfully comprehend recent events and project the future" (Littin 1974: 50-1).

But Littin's intervention is marked by an absence: he never says the words "exile cinema."





Los puños frente al cañón, dirs. Orlando Lübbert and Gastón Ancelovici (West Germany, 1975):"Production of this film began in Chile with the support of Chilean workers. It was completed outside of Chile with the help of the International Solidarity movement in support of the struggle of the Chilean people."

Los puños frente al cañón is an example of what Littin meant when he added that the Chilean resistance also demanded films that "that analyze different periods of the life of the country so as to rightfully comprehend recent events and project the future." The film tells the story of the labor movement in Chile, suggesting that the 1973 coup is only one instantiation of a long history of oppression and class struggle.

Así nace un desaparecido, dir. Angelina Vázquez (Finland, 1977): In the Caracas encounter, Littin claimed that the Chilean resistance demanded films that "have as a priority to forge the image of a people in struggle and with faith in victory." These are some works that fit that description. Vázquez's first film in exile uses animation to produce a powerful and didactic piece in which she explains what a "disappeared" is.	*Pinochet: asesino, fascista, traidor, agente del imperialismo*, dir. Sergio Castilla (Sweden, 1974): Using children's drawings, in Sweden, 1974, Sergio Castilla crafted a short animation that, according to him, achieved its goal just by virtue of appearing in the TV guide. The film gains meaning in the uttering of its title: *Pinochet: Fascist, Murderer, Traitor, Agent of Imperialism*—epithets that are repeated by the stark voice over of a woman in the soundtrack.
	
La revolución no la para nadie, dir. Juan Forch (East Germany, 1976): Directed by Juan Forch in the DEFA studios in East Germany, *La revolución no la para nadie* works purposefully in a temporal disjunction, celebrating the Popular Unity years as if Allende was still in power, the coup had not happened, and the revolution was still possible.	*Matan a mi mañungo!*, dir. Jorge Fajardo (Canada, 1979): *Matan a mi mañungo!* is a magnificent verité-style documentary portraying a group fast by Chilean exiles and Canadians in Montreal.

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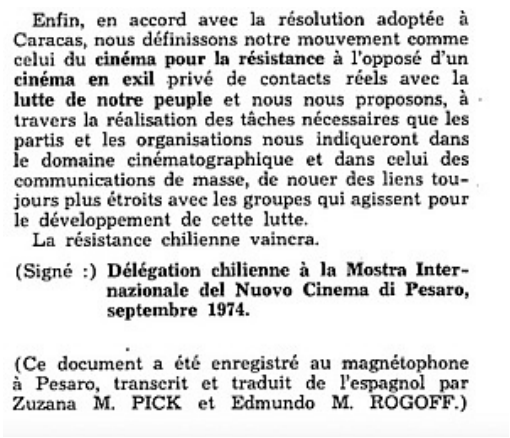
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Pesaro (1974)



Enfin, en accord avec la résolution adoptée à Caracas, nous définissons notre mouvement comme celui du **cinéma pour la résistance** à l'opposé d'un **cinéma en exil** privé de contacts réels avec la **lutte de notre peuple** et nous nous proposons, à travers la réalisation des tâches nécessaires que les partis et les organisations nous indiqueront dans le domaine cinématographique et dans celui des communications de masse, de nouer des liens toujours plus étroits avec les groupes qui agissent pour le développement de cette lutte.

La résistance chilienne vaincra.

(Signé :) **Délégation chilienne à la Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema di Pesaro, septembre 1974.**

(Ce document a été enregistré au magnétophone à Pesaro, transcrit et traduit de l'espagnol par Zuzana M. PICK et Edmundo M. ROGOFF.)

Collective declaration, Pesaro 1974: Published in *Positif* (Déc. 1974): 40-42. Directors Miguel Littin, Raúl Ruiz, Valeria Sarmiento, and actor Nelson Villagra formed the Chilean delegation at Pesaro. As the picture indicated, this declaration was read in Spanish, recorded at Pesaro and later transcribed and translated into French by Zuzana M. Pick and Edmundo M. Rogoff.



Raúl Ruiz teaching at the Instituto de Arte, Universidad Católica de Valparaíso.

Consider the last paragraph of a statement read by the Chilean delegation present at the 10th Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema de Pesaro, 1974. Instead of a cautious avoidance of the term, exile is formulated in conceptual opposition with the idea of resistance:

> "We define our movement as that of a cinema of resistance in opposition to a cinema in exile devoid of real contact with the struggle of our people. We are dedicated to strengthen our ties with the groups that are working towards further developing this struggle, through the tasks defined by the parties and organizations in relation to the spheres of cinema and mass media.The Chilean resistance shall overcome." ("Déclaration collective": 42).

Directors Miguel Littin, Raúl Ruiz, Valeria Sarmiento, and actor Nelson Villagra formed the Chilean delegation at Pesaro. A number of elements indicate a continuity with the declaration offered only days earlier in Caracas: the reference to the 1970 manifesto as the document that defined the foundations for the cinema to come; the political analysis of the Popular Unity; the summary of tasks achieved by Chile Films; the call to free imprisoned directors and actors; and the tendency to reduce everything to a question of cultural and ideological struggle. These aspects also suggest that the author of the Pesaro statement was most likely Miguel Littin.

In this idea of "making the films that the Chilean resistance demands" and in its opposition to exile, resistance comes to name an overarching category of films very different in nature. They are grouped by the fact that they can all be regarded as *instruments of cultural and political struggle*. But privileging this sense of unity had costs. It inevitably excluded a whole range of exile films and, at the same time, it homogenized the diversity of films that self-identified as from the left. Resistance thus produced Chilean cinema's own "others," which, the Pesaro statement tells us, go by the name of "exile cinema."

It is reasonable to assume that at least both Ruiz and Sarmiento were not in agreement with the language of this proclamation, especially its last paragraph, which suggests that filmmakers will follow political organizations in any way they deem necessary. Even if Ruiz was a militant of the Socialist Party, he was always against the category of the militant artist—in his words, "always a bad militant and a bad artist."

Ruiz's work in Chile offered evidence of his political unorthodoxy from the beginning; however, his caustic critique of the Chilean exile experience in *Dialogues of Exiles* (1974), which premiered at Pesaro, surprised his fellow filmmakers and was thought to be deeply inappropriate for the political conditions of the times. That is, in 1974 — a moment in which the Chilean dictatorship's rates of imprisonment, torture, murders, and disappearance were at their highest — the priorities of Chilean exile cinema should be anything but internal critique. This was, at least, what the rhetoric of resistance was broadcasting. Only one year after the Coup, the Pesaro statement must be read, then, as a sign of unity — or at least as a sign that unity was an attribute Chilean filmmakers were obliged to exhibit in their relation to the international

community.





Diálogo de exiliados, dir. Raúl Ruiz (France, 1974): Because of the mordacity of its humor in its portrait of Chilean exiles (it leaves some of them as opportunists and thieves), *Dialogues of Exiles* raised a controversy among Chilean filmmakers and the exile community, which deemed the film inappropriate for the times. Ruiz, however, was merely continuing the aesthetic project he had initiated in Chile —"*un cine de indagación*." Opposed to the didactic cinema of the likes of Solanas and Getino, and to the deeply allegorical work of someone like Glauber Rocha, Ruiz's cinema of "inquiry" was an effort in "ideological introspection"—a search for the clues that would explain a given group or nation.

Ruiz, thus, understood the nature of political cinema in less explicit terms than Littin. His was always an "irresponsible" cinema. This had costs. As he recalls—certainly with some degree of exaggeration: "After the response to *Dialogues of Exiles* there was a rupture with all organizations. In fact, I didn't seek it; I was literally excised from all Chilean and Latin American organizations. I had no other choice thus than to be French" (qted. in Cuneo 195-6).

The following two films below by Ruiz are examples of his ideological inversions:





La expropiación, dir. Raúl Ruiz (Chile, 1973): In *La expropiación*, a representative of the state comes to expropriate a farm and give the land to the peasants, but they don't want that and end up killing the man.

El realismo socialista, dir. Raúl Ruiz (Chile, 1973): *El realismo socialista*—according to Ruiz, made "to contribute to the internal debate in the Socialist Party"—shows us two opposed journeys: a conservative ad man in a process of political awakening that turns him into a radical leftist, and a worker who transitions from the extreme left to the extreme right.

Images from *La tierra prometida*, dir. Miguel Littin (Chile, 1972-4):

By no means do I want to create an artificial opposition between Littin and Ruiz. It is relevant to sketch, nonetheless, some of the differences between them. During the Popular Unity government, Littin was seen as the cinematic embodiment of the 1970 manifesto—in short, someone who conceived of cinema as an instrument, a tool in service of something much larger than cinema: revolution. Ruiz, in turn, deviated from all aesthetic norms and mandates. Ironic and mordacious, his early films were direct challenges to Leftist aesthetic imperatives. But even if they were unorthodox, Ruiz still made these films with the desire to engage with, not move away from, the aesthetic debates in the Left. The difference was that Ruiz thought of "resistance" not as the master concept







After resigning as president of Chile Films, Littin began a project that would materialize the ideas about national and popular culture he had sketched out in the 1970 manifesto, which proclaimed: "Let us no longer allow the dominant classes to uproot the symbols which the people have produced in the course of their long struggle for liberation." The result, impressive and challenging, was "perhaps the most ambitious undertaking in the history of Latin American militant cinema," according to Julianne Burton in her review for *Film Quarterly* (1975b: 57).

In this sequence, patriot Arturo Prat (one of those figures "uprooted" by the dominant classes to foster a nationalist narrative) emerges in the middle of the final battle to give his sword to Chirigüa. José Durán, the leader of the peasant revolt narrated by the film, returns from the dead, galloping, and also gives his firearm to Chirigüa. The scene suggests that political struggles exist in a continuum and that the Chilean people have history on their side.

under which to imagine practices of cultural struggle, but as a series of "tactics of rejection of any given order." Differing from Littin's acute sense of political responsibility, Ruiz considered his relationship with politics as one of "irresponsibility" and "experimentation" (Christie and Coad 103-114).

Exile placed Littin and Ruiz in different paths, too. This is not the place to examine at length the trajectories each of them faced after the coup, although it is safe to say that if exile enabled Littin to reimagine his affiliation to the Chilean nation by virtue of a strategic continentalism, exile provided Ruiz with the nomadic dream of a portable homeland, the world-citizenship of cosmopolitanism. What matters for the purposes of this essay is that one of them, Littin, responded to exile through the logic of resistance, forging the image of a people in struggle. And the other, Ruiz, responded very critically to what he called "the ideology of exile."[14] [open endnotes in new window] By this he meant the idealization of the past, the fetishization of the nation, and the easy reliance on "popular memory" and folk culture as ways to establish a closer link with the people. These are all elements that can be associated with Littin's cinema, and elements that Ruiz was highly suspicious of.

This contrast was also noted among critics at the time. In the review of Pesaro that preceded the published version of the Chilean "collective declaration" in *Positif*, Zuzana Pick articulated this confrontation quite well in her opening paragraph:

> "Even if the X Mostra Internazionale del Nuovo Cinema de Pesaro, version 1974, opened with *La tierra prometida* by Miguel Littin (Chile, 1974), it isn't perhaps until *Dialogues of Exiles* (1974) by Raúl Ruiz that we can realize the new meaning we should give to the struggles of liberation in Latin America. Because it is not enough for the revolution to pursue its course that survivors pick up the firearms of dead combatants, Raúl Ruiz shot last spring, in Paris, this Dialogue that is so much more than a film about the condition of Chilean exiles in France" (1974: 39).

Pick is making a reference here to the final sequences of *Promised Land*, in which Littin orchestrates a double "return of the heroes:" Chilean historical figures appear in the battleground to hand over a firearm to José—the peasant protagonist who had just been violently executed after leading a successful, however brief, takeover of a small town in the countryside. Later, José in turn hands over his arm to Chirigua, the younger man who survives him. In a kind of revolutionary passing of the mantle, the scene was meant to suggest that political struggles exist in a continuum and that the Chilean people have history on their side.

Pick's remark already anticipates, as we shall see, the debate in Moscow in 1979. The central point of her critique was that historical conditions had changed, and therefore, the visual iconography and political rhetoric of yesteryear no longer sufficed. She suggested they must give way to new aesthetic strategies if the cultural struggle of liberation was to have any meaning at all in the future.

Moscow (1979)

> "As an ideological concept, I prefer much more the definition of Cinema of Resistance than that of Exile Cinema" ("Orientación": 120).

Miguel Littin voiced these words in the Soviet Union in 1979. The Moscow International Film Festival had invited a group of Chilean exile filmmakers and writers for a panel entitled "Orientation and Perspectives on Chilean Cinema." Participants included novelist José Donoso and directors Jaime Barrios, Orlando Lübbert, and Miguel Littin, who came from Madrid, New York, East Berlin, and Mexico City, respectively. A few local figures, exiled in Moscow, joined the panel: director Sebastián Alarcón, cinematographer Cristián Valdés, journalist and former director of the Chile Films newsreel Eduardo Labarca, and novelist José Miguel Varas, who acted as a moderator. In fact, Littin's words came as a response to Varas, who began by reminding everyone of José Donoso's call to avoid the radical separation between those in Chile and those in exile—the need to insist that there was only one Chilean Cinema. Littin's understanding of cinema as a practice of cultural struggle thus enabled him to bypass that odious distinction between inside and outside that exile necessarily signals by its very name.



Panel at the Moscow film festival: In 1979, the Moscow International Film Festival invited a group of Chilean exile filmmakers and writers for a panel entitled "Orientation and Perspectives on Chilean Cinema." The panel was transcribed and published in 1980 in *Araucaria de Chile*—one of the leading Chilean cultural journals in exile.

By deeming the nature of his definition "ideological," Littin acknowledged that a different ideological analysis of the historical condition known as exile would allow for an equally valid alternative definition of exile cinema. Nevertheless, his opening sentence elicited a back and forth discussion between him and Donoso. Right after the words quoted above, Littin went on to explain why there had never been an exilic cinema as "vigorous" as the Chilean one, for two reasons:

> "the huge international solidarity movement and the fact that cinema [in Chile] was born committed to the popular cause" ("Orientación": 121).

Donoso replied by stating that they cannot be slaves of a single topic:

> "We can't keep doing for thirty or forty years of exile the film of the revolution or the film of torture. Our danger is to produce a pedagogic cinema and fail to take this great anger we feel as a starting point to open ourselves to the private life, the bureaucratic life, to the tragedy of exile" (122).

Littin argued back: the cinema that was born with a vocation of revolutionary cinema, with the people as its protagonist, cannot forget what happened in 1973 (123). The tone grew gradually harsher until they both settled the argument in a rather unexpected fashion: they concluded that there was in fact no disagreement since they were both saying the same thing.

But they weren't.

A conceptual opposition was proposed at the beginning of this conversation. On one side, "resistance" would follow the politically committed tradition of the cinema produced during the Popular Unity and seek to further the idea of Third Cinema as a "guardian of popular memory," as Teshome Gabriel once claimed. [15] On the other side, "exile cinema" would be a cinema that would eschew that commitment, avoid didacticism and explicit politics, and search for stories in individual rather than collective dramas. *On the one hand, on the other.*

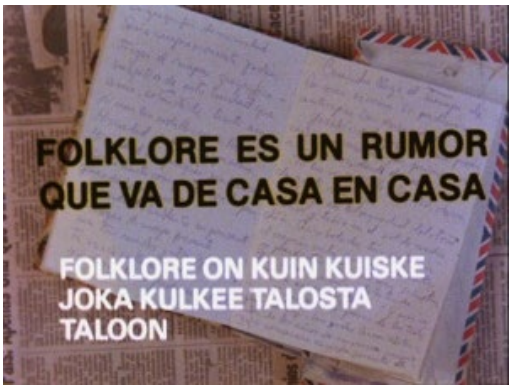
It was, of course, a forced opposition that obscured a great deal of common ground. All participants in the roundtable ended up agreeing to several points: that the cinema produced in exile had opened up multiple and simultaneous aesthetics and themes, and that sustained political denunciation of the Junta and

These are some examples from the turn to the first person in Chilean exile cinema:



Journal inachevé, dir. Marilú Mallet (Canada, 1982): Mallet plays herself, a Chilean filmmaker exiled in Montreal, in *Journal inachevé*—a meditation on exile and belonging. The film

explores the dichotomy between the author's *I* who speaks through the voice over and the performative self who appears on screen (the director's body).



Fragmentos de un diario inacabado, dir. Angelina Vázquez (Finland, 1983): In *Fragments from an Unfinished Diary*, Angelina Vázquez gives us elliptical and partial impressions of her brief and clandestine return to Chile. During her trip Vázquez kept a journal in Spanish, but the voice in the film corresponds to her collaborator Anita Mikkonnen, who spoke in Finnish. In *Fragments*, the author's self is thus performed, via the soundtrack, by someone else. The film plays on the slight mismatch between the words in the journal and those of Mikkonnen's voice.



Eran unos que venían de Chile, dir. Claudio Sapiaín (Sweden, 1987): Claudio Sapiaín, a filmmaker who lived in Sweden for eleven years with his wife Vilma and their son Paulo (who was less than a year old when they left Chile after the Coup), decided to return in the mid 1980s and made a film about it—*Eran unos que venían de Chile*. The narrative is structured around this return to Chilean soil, and features a first person reflection on rootedness and what it means to belong to a homeland and a culture. Sometimes, the voice over directly addresses Paulo, as if the father was writing a letter to his son.

The freeze frame in Chilean exile films:

active support of the popular resistance in Chile were still urgent. At the same time they all recognized that there was an encroaching "exhaustion of material," in the words of Sebastián Alarcón. Here, Alarcón argued that they needed to move from documentary to fiction and to allegory. He also complained that they were finding great difficulties, especially in capitalist countries, to convince producers to make films about Chilean politics.

But in spite of this general consensus, the words used throughout the discussion carried their heavy weight. "We were a rhetorical generation," claimed Lübbert near the end, almost as an apology. To this Littin replied:

> "I am not afraid of that word or of being didactic. It's just that everything is valid in our struggle against fascism" ("Orientación": 130).

Political rhetoric produces its own meanings, hierarchies, and myths. Littin's lexicon placed resistance as a political ideal of Chilean cinema at the same time that it used the term as a proxy for establishing a genealogy—one in which Chilean cinema was born with and out of the revolutionary process. Not only did such a distinction obliterate every film produced before the advent of what was called the "New Chilean Cinema" in the late 1960s, it also made irrelevant the enormous diversity of aesthetic and political projects that could fit under the rubric of a cinema committed "to the popular cause."

And so we reach a dead end. Littin spoke of the ideology behind opposing an exilic cinema and favoring a cinema of resistance. And Ruiz, as we saw earlier, speaks of an ideology of exile to designate something very close to Littin's ideology of resistance.

What is at stake in this opposition? Are these simply interchangeable terms? They can't be simply interchanged because they do not refer to the same thing. In this entangled rhetoric, resistance and exile are both products of the military coup, but they offer two distinct understandings of the same historical situation. Opposed concepts, each designates a set of very different practices and beliefs.

For Chilean exile filmmakers, the rhetoric behind resistance sought to produce a cinematic equivalent of the social practices of political struggle that go by that name. Invoking resistance aimed to accomplish three goals:

- to overcome the distance and absence from the homeland implied by the word "exile," connecting exilic activity with life under the dictatorship in Chile;
- to reaffirm the continuity of a project of revolutionary cinema;
- to become an instrument in the international solidarity campaign against the Junta.

An immersion in the drama of exile, on the other hand, was seen as a sign of failure. Here we find the seeds of what was to become another standard narrative: that the history of Chilean exile is also the transit from collectivity to individuality, from a politics expressed in the "we" to one expressed in the "I." After the political defeat (and the mourning that came in its wake) all that was left was the individual subject. Within this narrative, the idea of the community vanishes in the dispersion of the diaspora. The first-person plural gives way to the first-person singular. Resistance gives way to exile.

The conceptualization of resistance that I have sketched above, however, implies a lag in the political temporality of the exile subject. Resistance is antithetical to exile in that the latter refers to the present conditions that define one's



El color de la sangre no se olvida (MIR, 1975-6): A recurrent gesture in Chilean exile cinema: to freeze the frames on leftist icons—fists, red flags, Allende's close up, the presidential palace in flames. All of these examples are freeze frames from the final shots of each film. *El color de la sangre no se olvida* is a collective film made by the MIR (Movement of Revolutionary Left) to honor their leader Miguel Enríquez, assassinated by the dictatorship.



Hitler/Pinochet, dir. Juan Forch (East Germany, 1976): *Hitler/Pinochet*, a short animated satire that poses both dictators as equivalents in their fascism, ends with a message of hope: fists against a red backdrop and the legend *Venceremos* on top.



Mitbürger!, dirs. Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann (East Germany, 1974): In *Mitbürger!*, their first film in their series about Chile, East German directors Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann choose to end their

subjectivity. Everything in the rhetoric of resistance moves us from the present to the past. Its focus is on the Popular Unity, not exile. In short, resistance points towards the time when cinema was defined as a revolutionary art. It restores continuity to an aesthetic project and to a political temporality broken by the coup.

Here we need to recall Littin's argument of historical acceleration. In Allende's last months in power, the historical experience of the Chilean people was defined by velocity: important events would succeed each other in a matter of hours, not even days. But once in exile, their experience became defined by waiting: nothing happens because the only event that *could* happen would be the fall of the dictatorship, which would allow the exiles to return. So if the Popular Unity meant historical acceleration, resistance meant historical arrest. This need for detention is evidenced, aesthetically, in Chilean exile cinema's almost ritualistic gesture of freezing the frames on leftist icons: fists, red flags, Allende's close up, the presidential palace in flames. The freeze frame produces the sudden appearance of stasis in the continuum of the filmstrip while it also makes evident the breaks and discontinuities of historical time (as well as the radical rupture that the coup signifies). In these films, the freeze frame reminds us that the past extends itself into the present.

Reading the transcript of the Moscow debate, one gets the growing feeling that the participants knew that something had just changed or was changing in front of their eyes, but they could not state exactly what it was. The ready-made phrases proliferating in their language did not account for the depth of their own work or that of their fellow filmmakers. The concepts they were used to reiterate—solidarity, resistance, revolutionary cinema—did not describe the complexity of the historical crux in which they were: exile. That, no less, was the crisis: the ideological concepts Chilean exile filmmakers had clung to no longer sufficed.

The danger implicit in the rhetoric behind resistance was that the political might end up standing for an un-critical proliferation of leftist iconography and anti-imperialist lexicon, and nothing more. That is, political cinema would be reduced to iconic images or, even worse, to a platform from which to read formulaic declarations or statements.[16] Chilean exile filmmakers' use of "exile cinema" was filtered through a lens of defeat—that was its danger. They failed to realize that a process of self-introspection (a radical questioning of the subjectivity of exiles) could coexist with the logic of political resistance. One did not exclude the other, and certainly, one did not come *after* the defeat of the other. In the rhetoric behind their critique of the turn to the private and the intimate, Chilean exile filmmakers also failed to realize that a first-person enunciation could be simultaneously singular and plural, individual and collective, subjective and historical.

As an ideological simplification, the rhetoric opposing resistance and exile soon collapses because it did not match the complexity of life under exile. To protect against this, the official rhetoric, paradoxically, joined the two terms together. There was no resistance without an invocation of solidarity and there was no exile without an invocation of resistance, even if Chilean filmmakers situated resistance and exile at opposite ends in their conceptualization of cinema as a political practice.

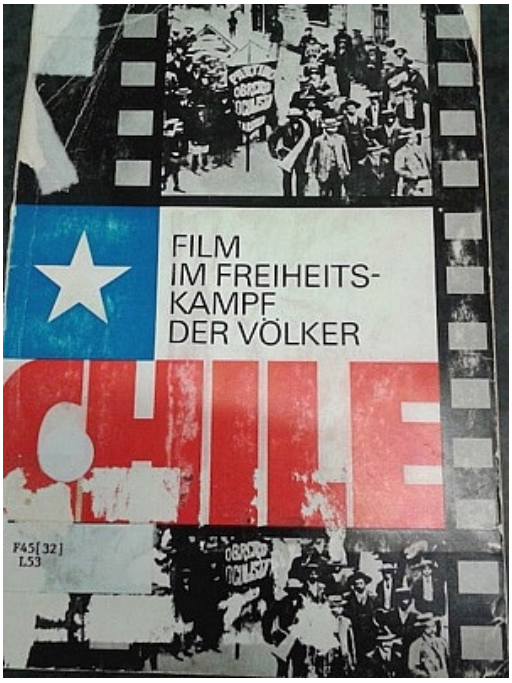
With this critique I don't want to suggest that there is no proper exilic discourse in Chilean exile cinema during the 1970s—by which I mean a discourse that reflects simultaneously about the experience of uprootedness and the experience of

photo-montage with a freeze frame of an extreme close-up of Allende's face.

making cinema in a different culture and under the umbrella of a foreign nation-state. Indeed, the production of such a discourse began soon after the coup. My point is that it was overshadowed by the more grandiloquent notion of resistance.

Conclusion

Chilean exile cinema's moment of exhaustion at the end of the 1970s expressed itself as a rhetorical impasse, a standstill that took on the form of an opposition between "resistance" and "exile." As I characterized it, "cinema of resistance" implied a lag in the temporality of the exile insofar as it insisted upon the political language and the militant aesthetics of the past in order to give meaning to the present. "Exile cinema," in turn, implied a direct confrontation with the historical and cultural conditions defining that present. For the more dogmatic filmmakers, making an exile cinema and being an exile director put forward an unruly focus on the individual. Who was the exile person? What was, after all, being an exile? No wonder some saw it as a kind of failure: with its attention to the everyday dramas of intercultural life, with its concern for the pains and sorrows (and perhaps even for the small joys and benefits, what a heresy!) of uprootedness, exile cinema departed from the major goal of a cinema of resistance. This goal was to render the political community that had been defeated visible. Resistance implied the invocation of this community to make it present, whether to mourn or to celebrate it.



Book cover: "Cinema in the Struggle for the Liberation of the Peoples—Chile": In 1979, the Leipzig film festival began to work on a special retrospective devoted to Chilean cinema to mark the 10th anniversary of the coup, in 1983. They called it: "Cinema in the Struggle for the Liberation of the Peoples—Chile." Leipzig had a tradition of cooperation with Chile and support of its cinema. Thus the 1983 program, defined as a retrospective against the oppression of the Chilean people and in support of the international solidarity movement with Chile, was one more step in a long history of socialist friendships (See Villarroel and Mardones 122-9; 197-8).

Exile cinema, in turn, was devoted to redirecting the object of mourning through the imaging of its present remains. Since archival footage of the people in the streets, the iconic murals, the revolutionary songs, the slogans in chants, and the political analysis codified by an anachronistic language had all lost their efficacy, such redirection, in order to get to the core of the exile experience, could only mean a turn inwards, a turn towards the exile subject.

The usage of resistance lost some of its prevalence among Chilean exile filmmakers in the latter part of the 1970s and the following decade.[17] But it did not disappear or exhaust itself; it resisted and persisted in important platforms for the circulation and critical reception of Chilean exile cinema. Two examples were the Havana Film Festival in 1979 (where *The Battle of Chile* won the documentary prize) and the Leipzig Film Festival in 1983 (with the special retrospective "Cinema in the Struggle for the Liberation of the Peoples—Chile").

In this essay I have focused on programmatic and discursive platforms like film festivals and filmmakers' meetings, with the understanding that a historical phenomenon like Chilean exile cinema cannot be limited to a study of its films alone. If festivals have been theorized in recent years as nodal points in the networks of transnational film production,[18] one can extend this to argue that they also served as key poles in the exilic "ciné-geography" [19] of Chilean cinema and became tools through which exile filmmakers navigated the fraught geopolitical space of the Cold War.

The meetings in Caracas, Pesaro, and Moscow allow us to follow the trajectory of an ideological exchange. Resistance, solidarity, and exile are not static terms; they move across different films, geopolitical spaces, and times. Following that movement, I want to suggest that discourses associated with these concepts were instrumental in producing the emergence of Chilean exile cinema and also its survival. Far from being exhausted by the end of the 1970s, the idea of resistance persisted not only in the tautological political rhetoric of filmmakers. It found new channels of expression in networks of solidarity where film festivals played a key role.

Il n'y a pas d'oubli, dirs. Rodrigo González, Marilú Mallet and Jorge Fajardo (Canada, 1975): Produced by the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) in 1975, *Il n'y a pas d'oubli* was conceived as a coherent whole made of three independent medium length pieces directed by Chilean exile filmmakers: *J'explique certaines choses* by Rodrigo González, *Lentement* by Marilú Mallet, and *Jours de fer* by Jorge Fajardo. Each part develops its own aesthetics and its own thematic reflection about the condition of exile in general and the situation of Chilean exiles in Montreal in particular. The film constituted the best early example of an aesthetic, political, and historical reflection on exile. In their proposal to the NFB the filmmakers argued that exile was constituted by three phases: "the ghetto, subsistence, and integration—the moment in which exile is finally transformed into the quotidian."



J'explique certaines choses, dir. Rodrigo González (Canada, 1975): Gonzalez's piece addressed the phase of the "ghetto," since it was devoted to the relations between a community of exiles that could only speak the language of the past.



Lentement, dir. Marilú Mallet (Canada, 1975): Mallet's film, with its focus on everyday life, spoke for the phase of "integration."



Jours de fer, dir. Jorge Fajardo (Canada, 1975): Fajardo's closing segment, focusing on the very first days of a man in Québec who starts a new job, represented the period of "subsistence."

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Notes

1. Most of the films realized between 1970-1973, especially documentaries, were produced by or in close cooperation with institutions tied to universities and unions. Cine Experimental de la Universidad de Chile was the most prolific, but there were other hubs, such as the Instituto Fílmico de la Universidad Católica, Departamento de Cine de la Universidad Técnica del Estado, and Departamento de Cine de la Central Única de Trabajadores (CUT, the main union association in the country). For a recent reevaluation of the work of Chile Films during the Popular Unity, see Del Valle Dávila (361-377). [return to text]

2. For an elaboration of this claim, see Palacios 2013 (134) and 2015 (148).

3. For a historical overview of Chilean exile cinema, see Zuzana Pick's piece in *Jump Cut* (1987). Pick's long commitment to researching this exilic phenomenon produced the most relevant essays on the subject until this date. For a more theoretical account of Chilean exile cinema, the reader should go to her article in *Framework* (1988).

4. Perhaps the strongest expression of solidarity with Chile after the coup manifests itself in the associations and groups formed by local members of the host society together with exile communities. The numerous "friends of Chile" groups, "Chile committees," and "Anti-Fascist Leagues" that emerged everywhere in the world are the best example.

5. Jacqueline Mouesca claims that after five years of exile a new set of themes begins to emerge and that by 1983 the cycle of Chilean exile cinema was reaching an end (1984: 36; 1988: 147-55). Peter B. Schumann (13-4) and José Agustín Mahieu (241-56) have made similar claims: sometime in the late 1970s, Chilean exile cinema opens up to a variety of themes, less concerned with Chilean politics. More recently, Michael Goddard has argued that the kind of ethnography of exile that Ruiz was practicing by 1974 would characterize a good deal of Chilean exile cinema, "but only at a later moment in time" (32). Zuzana Pick does not make this evolutionary argument. Nonetheless her division of Chilean exile filmmakers into various generations implies that the younger directors show a broader range of thematic and political concerns (Pick 1987: n.p.).

6. Among the early films that did not have a militant approach to exile or Chilean politics, consider *Diálogo de exiliados* (Raúl Ruiz, France, 1974), *Il n'y a pas d'oubli* (Jorge Fajardo, Marilú Mallet, and Rodrigo Gonzáles, Canada, 1975), *Los transplantados* (Percy Matas, France, 1975), and *La femme au foyer* (Valeria Sarmiento, France, 1975). Among the 1980s films that retained a militant aspiration, we can find *Apuntes nicaragüenses* (Angelina Vázquez, Finland, 1982), *Nicaragua: The Dream of Sandino* (Leutén Rojas, Canada), *Así golpea la represión* (Peter Nestler and Rodrigo Gonçalves, Sweden, 1983), *Chile, no incovo tu nombre en vano* (Colectivo Cine-Ojo, France/Chile, 1983), *Chile: wo der Schmerz beginnt* (Orlando Lübbert, West Germany, 1983), and *Acta General de Chile* (Miguel Littin, Spain, 1986),

7. This was probably the first manifesto published by Chilean filmmakers after the Coup and a collective effort in cooperation in spite of geographic dispersion. The document was signed by Group Stockholm, Group Paris, Group Havana, Group Berlin, Group Madrid, Group New York, Group Canada, and Group Mexico City (Villarroel and Mardones 87-8).

8. See *Por un cine latinoamericano* (1974) for the procedures of this event. The book, published shortly after the Caracas encounter, includes transcriptions of speeches, statements, and resolutions from the different working groups that met to discuss issues of film legislation, production, distribution, and archiving and preservation. For a recent and more personal recollection of the Caracas encounter, see Trabucco (2014: 385-93).

9. All translations from Spanish and French are mine unless otherwise noted.

10. Here we find an echo of the Chilean manifesto in 1970, which declared: "before filmmakers we are men engaged within the political and social phenomenon of our people" (Littin 1976: 83).

11. While Chile serves as the main example, these tasks are extended to all nations in the Southern Cone under military dictatorships, which by 1974 included Bolivia, Uruguay, and Brazil.

12. Besides the inclusion of Littin's talk in the book collecting the documents from Caracas, the text is also reprinted in the Mexican magazine *Octubre* (Littin 1975).

13. Littin would reiterate this idea in his interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma ("Entretien:"* 61).

14. See Pick 1974: 39. [return to page 2]

15. Gabriel himself often used Littin's films as examples in his essays (1989).

16. In her review of Pesaro 1975, Julianne Burton claims that "the political content of the festival itself, apart from what was manifest or to be construed on an individual basis from the specific films, was generally reduced to the formal reading of declarations" (1975a: n.p.).

17. Another way to think about this issue comes via an exilic institution. Devoted to cataloguing, archiving, and promoting Chilean cinema, *Cinemateca Chilena* was founded in exile by Pedro Chaskel and Gastón Ancelovici in 1974. I say "Cinemateca Chilena" in order to avoid the confusions arising from its dual name, which went from Cinemateca Chilena de la Resistencia (Chilean Cinémathèque of Resistance) to Cinemateca Chilena en el Exilio (Chilean Cinémahèque in Exile). The reasons, history and timeline for this change are unclear and to some extent contradictory. Discussing it requires a different essay, but what warrants attention is that the shift in the naming of this institution suggests the idea of different phases—"exile" being different from the phase intelligible under the name "resistance." The assumption, in a similar vein of what was discussed in Moscow in terms of "exhaustion," is that "resistance" was becoming a less fashionable term especially in non-socialist countries, given that the international solidarity movement with Chile was in decline by the late 1970s.

18. See De Valck and Iordanova.

19. Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray used the term "ciné-geography" to designate "situated cinecultural practices in an expanded sense." Conceived as a way to map the exchanges between different movements associated with the "militant image," the concept of ciné-geography makes thinkable the transnational connections between forms of political organization, modes of production/ distribution/

exhibition, and “discursive platforms” such as gatherings, meetings, and manifestos (Eshun and Gray 1).

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Little hopes and pleasures: revisiting Tanner's *Jonah* (1976)

by Joshua Sperling



Jonah presents a group portrait of post-Utopian compromise and possibility.
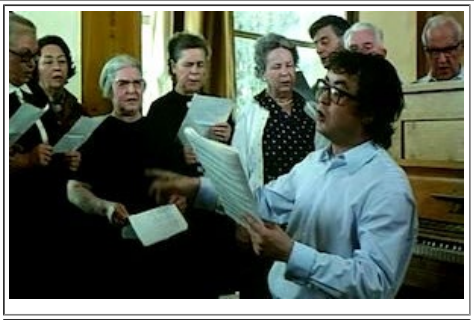


The only exception to the film's motley collection of optimists is Max. Here he has his head in his hands as the rest of the group sings.

"Politics are finished," says Max, the soured historical-materialist in John Berger and Alain Tanner's *Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000*. As the film's lovable grump, it is a sentiment he repeats often. "What was May '68 to you?" he asks his new hippie girlfriend, "Cherry blossom time?" Later he reveals the source of his disillusion: he used to belong to an activist group. "In the sixties," he clarifies, and starts to count up with his hand. "64, 65, 66, 67, 68." At this point he stops, having reached a pinnacle, and counts back down. "69, 70, 71, 72."

Jonah was made in 1976. Both Berger and Tanner considered themselves to be undogmatic Marxists and the film, set in French-speaking Switzerland, was about how to live in the backwash of political expectation. Once thought to be dress rehearsals for an ultimate revolutionary event, the uprisings of the late sixties, particularly the strikes and demonstrations that swept through France in May 1968, now seemed to belong to a different age. And so *Jonah* asks: How to live after political failure? How to live with a modicum of hope, with warmth and community—and maybe even with a little bit of fun? Aside from Max, the other seven characters, all in their twenties or thirties, are still dreamers. They are still out to salvage something of the spirit of the counterculture in a world that has moved on, and flattened back to business-as-usual. Politics are finished, Max tells them, but they go about politics by other means: as progressive teachers, organic farmers, sexual explorers. "You don't allow for little pleasures?" one of them asks.



Max, the ex-revolutionary, and Madeleine, the sexual explorer, at an arcade. While Max fulminates against the trivial pleasures of the present, Madeline sings *Le temps des cerises*.



Le temps de cerise was a revolutionary song of the Paris Commune. Later in the film, Marco leads a choir at an old-age home. "We will all be celebrating / pretty girls will have foolish ideas in their heads / and lovers sunshine in their hearts." But the song also acknowledges that utopia can be temporary, and can leave, "an open wound in the heart."

It has now been forty years since *Jonah*. The child it is named after would be



Max, disillusioned veteran of Paris 1968, is a lovable grouch, proto-hipster, and the film's contrarian Marxist conscience. Some hard-liners criticized *Jonah*, essentially taking up Max's position vis-à-vis the film itself.

entering middle age. How would he view his parents? How should we, alive in 2016, view the film? What can we learn from the collaboration that gave rise to it and the divided response it provoked?

In some ways *Jonah*'s politics are as outdated as its haircuts. In others ways the film was prophetic, crystallizing a mood and set of questions that are still with us, or have only grown more pressing. Variations on the same debates continue to work their way through our college campuses, street protests, political rallies, music festivals, and small farms. What are politics? *Where* are they? How do they work in a post-utopian world?

Jonah, and the reaction it provoked, held up a mirror to these questions at a time when the answers had grown opaque. The mood on the left was grim, the marriage between the political and cultural vanguards was dissolving, and the global party-politics of revolution was giving way—arguably already had—to a more local focus on the body, the land, cultural and sexual identity, lifestyle, food and the everyday. *Jonah* also set off a debate about the nature of political art. Can a political film be pleasurable? Can it be consolatory? Or was *Jonah*, a comedy, nothing more than an exercise in cherry-blossom nostalgia and reassurance?






Jonah explores the small hopes and "little pleasures" of a group of friends in Geneva and a nearby organic farm.



Nice Time tacitly celebrated the innocent human need for pleasure and fun…

The Berger-Tanner collaboration

Let's begin with where *Jonah* came from, and what it meant to the two men who made it: the Swiss filmmaker Alain Tanner and the English writer and art-critic, John Berger. Their period of work (1971-1976) represents one of the most unique collaborations in film history. In what follows I want to develop the idea that the dialectic between play and politics found in *Jonah*—and that so divided the left in the mid-70s—grew out of the artistic tensions of their partnership. Or to put it another way: the temporary coming-together of the Berger-Tanner collaboration symbolized, in miniature, the New Left's broader, and ultimately unsuccessful, attempts at synthesis.

This parallel becomes clearer with some historical background.

Berger and Tanner first met in London in the mid-1950s. At that time, Berger was



…while also critiquing the ways that need could be exploited and turned for a profit.



Jonah was the third film made by the Swiss filmmaker, Alain Tanner, and the British writer and art-critic, John Berger. Their collaboration was one of the most unique in film history.



Tanner's short documentary, *Nice Time*, made with Claude Goretta, documented the new mass-nightlife of Picadilly Circus.

making a name for himself as the brash, young art-critic for the *New Statesman*. He was an outspoken Marxist and the figurehead for social realism in British painting. Tanner, for his part, was in his twenties, an aspiring filmmaker and boarder in Lindsay Anderson's house, where weekly salons would bring together prominent figures of the cultural left.

It was in this milieu that Berger and Tanner crossed paths. When Tanner's short documentary, *Nice Time* (1957), was included in a Free Cinema Programme, Berger praised the film. He complimented what he saw as "the possibility of protest" in its attitude toward its subject: the new nightlife of Picadilly Circus. But, he added, "the point is that the protest is not an aloof, administrative or high-minded one."[1] [open notes in new window] In its collage of promenading couples, moviegoers, street musicians, beggars, cruisers, and police, *Nice Time* tacitly celebrated the innocent urge for fun while it critiqued the ways that fun could be controlled and marketed for a profit. (This double-movement would later become a trademark of Tanner's "subversive charm.")

In 1960, Berger left England for Geneva. He had reached an impasse with regular art criticism and moved to the continent in the hope of becoming a more imaginative, and European, writer. This meant, alongside essays and novels, an openness to collaboration and an interest in new visual media. He began regularly appearing on British television and worked with a friend of Tanner's, the Swiss photographer Jean Mohr, on the first of several documentary photo-texts that explore the relationship between words and images.

During this same period—the mid 1960s—Tanner spent several years in Paris where he met many of the leading figures of the *Nouvelle Vague*. By the end of the decade he had returned to Geneva and was working for Swiss television. The first direct collaboration between the two men occurred in 1966 when Tanner asked Berger to write the narration for a television documentary about Chandigarh and Le Corbusier. But it wasn't until the early 70s, and Tanner's turn to fiction, that the collaboration began in earnest.

Charles mort ou vif and *La Salamandre*

Tanner's first feature, *Charles mort ou vif* (1969), grew partly out of conversations with Berger. The film was a gleefully insolent critique of conformity. In a mixture of aphorisms and wild skits reminiscent of Godard, it follows a middle-aged businessman's self-repudiation and rebirth as a bohemian. The film ends as Charles is taken to a mental institution. He reads a philosophical passage to the ambulance drivers:

> "Saint-Just said that the concept of happiness was new in France and in the world. And we might say the same of unhappiness. The awareness of unhappiness presupposes the possibility of something different. Maybe today the conflict happiness-unhappiness, or the awareness of a possible happiness and of a real unhappiness, has replaced the old concept of destiny. Is that not the secret of our generalized malaise?"

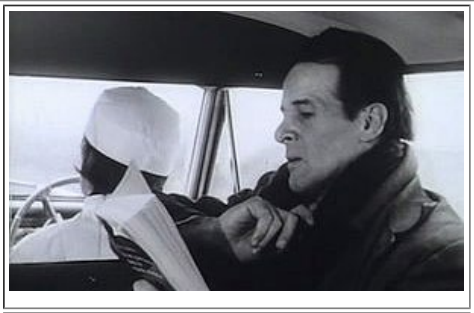
The two drivers put on the siren, shut him up, and speed off. That was Tanner's style: abrasive and energetic, philosophical but never too serious.

The same verve and irreverence characterized his second film, *La Salamandre* (1971), about a fickle, ungovernable young woman and two middle-class intellectuals fascinated by her disregard for social norms. The film, for which

Berger received a screenwriting credit, played at Cannes and was a festival success. It introduced the world to the New Swiss Cinema and was praised for its coarse and energetic freedom.



Tanner's first feature film, *Charles mort ou vif*, follows the radical awakening and self-transformation of a middle-aged businessman (far left), and his friendship with a bohemian couple.



In the last scene of the film, Charles, on his way to a mental institution, reads from a treatise on the revolutionary content of happiness.



La Salamandre was the first film of Tanner's for which Berger received a screenwriting credit. It is a study of the youthful recalcitrance and caprices of a young woman, Rosemonde.



Two middle-class intellectuals (and men) become fascinated by Rosemonde. One is a journalist and the other a writer. Each tries to explain the meaning of her rebellion according to the tools of his métier. But ultimately, the film suggests, her recalcitrance exists even on the level of interpretation: her rebellion cannot be reduced to ideology.

But while *Charles* fit neatly into a Situationist line of protest, the politics of *La Salamandre* were harder to pin down. The English critic George Melly expressed this ambiguity. Speaking of Rosemonde, whose nickname gives the film its title, he wrote:

> "How would she, with her flashes of insight and obstinate exercise of whim, her flirtation with criminality, her neurotic messiness, get by under the more rigid bureaucracies of the Left? Has Marxism room in its tidy bed for randy little anarchists? There's never been any indication of it in practice."[2]

The contradiction belonged to the 1960s counter-culture in general. The youth movement, as is often said, contained both LSD and SDS: rock concerts and Marxist pamphlets. In 1971, when *La Salamandre* was released, the marriage between these two poles remained more or less intact. Though the film rejected any neatly ideological happy ending, such as the birth in Rosemonde of a political consciousness, it was released at a cultural moment when personal rebellion, no matter how unfocused or adolescent, could still be subsumed under the broader

tide of emancipation.



"As I see him," Berger wrote in the notes to *Le milieu du monde*, "Paul is a man who cannot *contain* his passion." He embodies the unconscious political philosophy of a technocratic, managerial class.



Adriana, an Italian migrant, is "still, to a degree, outside the controls of the managerial-consumer society," Berger wrote.

Le milieu du monde

Both *Charles* and *La Salamandre* bear the unmistakable stamp of Tanner's formative years in London and Paris. Both breathe with the youthful, unyielding exuberance of the British Free Cinema movement and the French New Wave. And though both received pseudo-political readings in the press—and were seen as bellwethers of the zeitgeist—neither was an exercise in pamphleteering. The same was more or less true, despite its coda of community activism, for Tanner's third and hard-to-see film, *Return from Africa* (1973), about a couple's extended staycation in a Geneva apartment. All of Tanner's first three films were expressions of intensely personal, unruly and often anti-social desires rather than ideological tracts. They were political in the same way that Rimbaud's early poetry or a Jimi Hendrix solo was political.

During this period, Berger's interest in the-personal-and-the-political came from a much more philosophical place. It grew out of a larger project that aimed to theorize the connections between Marxism, Modernism and phenomenology. This more abstract undertaking expressed itself in Berger and Tanner's second collaboration, *Le milieu du monde* (1974). In my view, this is the film of Tanner's that owes the most to Berger—in both theme and tone. (Ironically, although perhaps understandably, Berger later expressed a certain disappointment with the finished product.)

Le milieu du monde charts the 112-day rise and fall of a disruptive, potentially liberatory, affair between a provincial Swiss politician and a migrant Italian waitress. Gone is the bohemian milieu of Tanner's first three films. And whereas both *Charles* and *La Salamandre* had been loud, rambunctious and often ironic, the emotional palette of *Le milieu du monde* is somber. The long landscape shots of snow; the muted blacks and grays of the color scheme; a slow-moving and seemingly autonomous camera; the uninflected, theoretical voiceover. All of these elements, contrasting sharply with the on-screen romance, elicited references to Brecht and point to Godard's *Vivre sa vie* (1962) as well as Antonioni's trilogy with Monica Vitti: *L'Avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), and *L'Eclisse* (1962).

The high-minded modernism of *Le milieu du monde* also grew out of Berger's own literary work from the previous years, particularly his Booker-winning novel, *G.* In its combination of meta-fiction, historical analysis and romance, the film transposes the aesthetic strategy of Berger's novel to the medium of film. Just as *G.* begins by asserting both the independent reality and the fictionality of its historical characters, *Le milieu du mond e*begins with a shot of a film crew at work, followed by self-reflexive narration about the historical nature of cinema and the moment of the film's making.



Le milieu du monde was a stylistic departure for Tanner, who had previously



Austere shots of the Swiss landscape and the passing seasons punctuate the story of

been a chronicler of bohemian energy and dreams.	the affair.
	
An early self-reflexive shot of the crew coincides with voice-over narration about cinema and history.	Tanner's discrete and distant camera frames the characters as lone figures in a provincial landscape.

The film, we are told, takes place during a period of "normalization," defined as a time that allows for the free exchange of goods and ideas *so long as nothing fundamentally is changed*. (Anyone familiar with Berger's essays will immediately recognize this kind of sentence and sentiment.) "Hopes remain," the female narrator says, "but they are normalized into old, stereotyped attitudes... Only words, dates and seasons change." The film's anatomy of the frustrated affair between the politician and waitress transposes this theory of political stasis to the realm of sexual intimacy.

	
Le milieu du monde investigates the connection between the personal and the political through the allegory of sexual passion.	Passion represents the awakening of utopian consciousness in the individual.
	
But in a time of "normalized" hopes, utopian desire is compartmentalized ...	... and betrayed rather than fulfilled.

Sexuality and politics



Ways of Seeing is the series, and later book, for which Berger is best known. It remains a foundational text for arts education and visual studies.



One episode included a women's roundtable on the topic of the male gaze and its impact on female self-perception.



Another episode decoded the new "philosophical system" of visual advertising, consumerism, and sexuality. "Publicity both promises and threatens. It plays upon fear. Often the fear of not being desirable, of being un-enviable."

Le milieu du monde was part of a broader intellectual project of Berger's to account for the relation of sexuality and politics. In the 1950s, when Berger was practicing as an art-critic, he had been criticized for his "boy-scout" puritanism. This was a common charge leveled by postwar liberal and existentialist critics against Communists and social realists, whom they parodied as neo-Victorian in their prudishness.

With the rise of the New Left and Second-Wave Feminism, the division between pleasure and politics fell away. During this time Berger pursued his own intellectual investigations into their connection. His 1972 novel *G.*, which dealt directly with Don Juanism and revolution, implied that in non-revolutionary periods, utopian impulses were redirected into sex. (The book was dedicated to his then-wife Anya Bostock, "and her sisters in Women's Liberation.") Meanwhile, Berger's pioneering television broadcast, *Ways of Seeing*, also from 1972, connected the pictorial tradition of the female nude to objectification and presented a provocative, and in many ways groundbreaking, decoding of the new visual language of consumerism, glamour and sexuality.

Berger's attempt to locate a political content in the personal experience of desire and sexuality was no doubt influenced by theorists such as Herbert Marcuse and Wilhelm Reich. (Berger's wife from this period translated many Western Marxist authors, including Reich.) He also worked for a time with Dusan Makavejev on an aborted film script that allegorized, as with the Yugoslav director's earlier *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism (*1971), an inter-cultural and cross-class sexual encounter.[3] If we return to *Le milieu du monde*, the Swiss politician's failure to take full ownership of his passion—his psychic need to compartmentalize it and reduce it to the level of obsession and infantile symptomology—reflects the historical self-denial of the managerial-political class. The film asserts that the technocratic impulse, whether political or sexual, will necessarily thwart any true renewal.

A cinema of ideas

Among the first things Berger wrote for *Le milieu du monde* were two long letters —essays, really—meant for the principal actors. In these, Berger theorized the personality of the character the actor was to play. But he did so not by providing a personal history or backstory, but by describing an *existential outlook*. Each character epitomized a philosophical and psychological stance before the film's central theme: the nature of sexual passion.

Berger's letter to Phillipe Leótard, for example, who plays the Swiss politician, reads less like dramatic direction and more like a structuralist treatise. Berger writes,

> "There is no simple analogy to make the relation between the 'lovers' totality' and the world clear. Perhaps the nearest is the relation between an ideal language and the universe. The state of being in love *signifies* the universe: the universe is its 'signified.'"[4]

These letters, excerpts of which were published separately, are evidence of the

unique nature of the Berger-Tanner collaboration. Berger was not simply a co-screenwriter; he was the film's in-house philosopher. His primary work was to *help theorize the film's central philosophical question*. And then, to investigate this question *through the device of character*.

Character, for the Berger-Tanner collaboration, serves less as an agent for drama than as a vessel for philosophical speculation. As in the sketches of Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, or the essayistic fiction of Robert Musil, each character typifies an *attitude:* a possible stance, vis-à-vis a pressing historical or philosophical question. In so far as *Le milieu du monde* and Berger and Tanner's next collaboration, *Jonah*, were constructed from this philosophical—rather than dramatic—architecture, they are the cinematic equivalents of the "novel of ideas."



Jonah presents an essay-like mosaic of visual quotations and leitmotifs. Recurrent themes include: (1) animals, ...



.... (2) time, ...



... (3) food, ...



... (4) children, ...



... 5) political tumult and ...



... (6) the teachings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a native of Geneva.

Jonah and the failure of '68

In the case of *Jonah*, the pressing philosophical question is: *how to go on living in the face of political defeat*. How to live after the failure of what Berger called "the Great synthetic prophecy of '68"? How to live during a period of normalization? All of the film's characters, with the exception of Max, are aging idealists. They are still seeking utopia within the contours of their own life and actions. The group



Marco's fantasy in *Jonah* is to go to bed with two

women. One aspect of the film's sexual politics rested on a distinction between liberated pleasure and socially manipulated (consumerist) desire. The latter excludes while the former connects. But *Jonah*, as with much of the left at the time, had far from shed a patriarchal bias.

includes two organic farmers; a secretary into Tantric sex; a teacher with a penchant for outlandish pedagogy; a cashier who undercharges the elderly; a former union-leader turned progressive educator; and Max, the disillusioned ex-activist, who now fears he is political history and seeks escape in gambling. The characters are not meant to be fully formed, as in a realist film, but embodied variations on a theme. Their inner life—the content of their hopes and daydreams—defines them as much as their social position.

The film switches between color and black-and-white to suggest this duality. One black-and-white scene shows the fantasies of a character who longs to be pregnant; another imagines a real estate speculator turned into a pig; yet another shows Max aiming a gun at himself in the mirror only to fire it at the ticking clock instead. Interspersed with these oneiric segments are quotations from a diverse set of intellectuals and writers; black-and-white archival footage (visual quotations) showing moments of overt turmoil and conflict; songs sung by the characters; and several mini-lectures, given to a high-school class, on the nature of historical time and capitalism.

Jonah thus works both as a group portrait of post-Utopian consciousness and as a *Lehrstuk* of interwoven leitmotifs: food, animals, sexuality, time, and childhood. The dance between these many registers—from black-and-white to color, play to work, hopes to reality—moves in a spirited, sweet-and-sour mélange that connects the disparate elements.

The desire to connect, not contrast, is most evident in the film's egalitarian dramatic structure. None of the actors was a star in the conventional sense. None possesses model-like looks. And while Max, Marco (the teacher), and Matthieu (the union organizer) are perhaps the most developed and present to the audience, the film distributes emphasis more or less equally to all eight characters. Whereas modern equivalents of the so-called "network narrative" usually seek a splintered, postmodern connection, *Jonah*'s canvas is local, not global. It strives for communion. The climactic scene of the film is a festive meal and song. Its closing image is of a mural drawn by the commune's schoolchildren of the adults. The Jonah of the title represents the collective prophecy of the eight friends and lovers.



Matthieu is the father of Jonah. He embodies humble optimism and a willingness to try new things. Having been laid off from a factory job, where he was a union organizer, he begins working as a farmer and then finds his vocation teaching young children.



Marco is a history teacher who is fired from his job at a high-school and takes a job working with pensioners. His fantasy, in a likely bid to diffuse the seriousness of his character, is to sleep with two women.



Madelaine is a secretary who earns quick money to travel to exotic places. She is a devotee of Tantrism. When Max learns that her boss is speculating on land-deals, she aids him in his efforts to inform the farmers.



Marie works at a supermarket where she undercharges her customers. She has a playful, tender friendship with Charles, a pensioner, whom she brings groceries to. Pauline Kael remarked on the fresh magnetism of the actress, Miou-Miou.

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David Denby wrote that *Jonah*, although very European, channeled the atmosphere of "Cambridge, Berkeley, Madison, Ann Arbor and the village—all those melancholy youth retirement homes..."

From society to the group

The utopian interest in community was a shift for both Berger and Tanner. Their prior works had explored the question of the individual-in-society more than the group. But here again, the meaning of that transposition was complex. On the one hand it emphasized the power of communion at a time of disintegration. On the other hand, it contracted the scale of utopian longings from total social transformation to the texture of the everyday and the community. The film's ambivalence on this point signaled a watershed moment on the left: while many former activists drew inspiration from its vision of hope in the dark, other hardliners criticized *Jonah* as indulgent.

The division was exacerbated by the film's popularity. Released in 1976, it had a surprisingly long and successful run throughout Europe and North America. It demonstrably had tapped into a cultural mood. The renowned critic for the *New Yorker*, Pauline Kael, as well as the iconic French critic, Serge Daney, both praised the film's vigor and freedom. A young David Denby, who later succeeded Kael at the *New Yorker*, called Tanner, once thought of as a lesser Godard, "the Renoir of the 70s."[5] [open notes in new window]

Jonah turned the residual melancholy and regret of a generation into a powerful sense of affirmation and resolve. One of the last shots of the film follows Matthieu, the father of Jonah, singing on his motorbike. The song is an elegiac ballad he has made up about his friends. On the voice-over we hear him talk softly to his future child. "I'll try to keep your hopes together," he says, "so they don't disappear."

Perhaps the most telling proof of what the film meant to its audience was the number of future parents, including the filmmakers Alfonso Cuaron and Fernando Trueba, who named their children, born in the late 70s, Jonah. For an aging generation needing badly to recuperate some sense of hope, the film provided that in a very profound, personal way to many people.

The *Jump Cut* debate

But *Jonah* was also a comedy made at a time when the left wasn't supposed to be smiling. It became at once a touchstone of post-68 consolation and a target for attack. While articles in the mainstream press fawned over Tanner's "Merry Marxist Guerillas," a 1977 issue of this journal published a debate under the tagline "Tanner's *Jonah*: Subversive Charm or Reactionary Nostalgia."

Robert Stam defended the film in what remains one of the best analyses of Tanner's aesthetics. He called *Jonah* "a dialectical music of ideas" and compared it to Vigo's *Zero de conduite*, as well as to Godard and Brecht. His basic point was that Tanner politicized the natural desires of a mainstream audience. The film was not, Stam argued, like many other leftist films: a bitter pill, however sugarcoated, appealing to the viewer's intellect and guilt. Instead, *Jonah* celebrated fun, play, warmth, community, freedom—all impulses that, among other things, bring people to the movies. The film meant to free those impulses from the oppressive contortions of market-based social manipulation, and reveal their revolutionary potential. Stam wrote,

"*Jonah* was not made for leftists, it was made for a mass audience. It tries to appeal to what is revolutionary in most people: in all those, at least, who have no direct stake in oppression."[6]





In one of the most iconic scenes from *Jonah*, Marco illustrates different conceptions of historical time by using a sausage. The set piece exemplifies the film's unique, and at times contradictory, mixture of playfulness and didacticism: a mixture inherent to the Berger-Tanner collaboration. Marco makes the kids laugh, but he also teaches them a lesson.



In his monograph *Revisioning Europe,* Jerry White argues that "the films [Berger and Tanner] made together offered a vision of political cinema that was unsentimental about the possibilities of

A rebuttal essay, co-authored by Linda Green, John Hess and Robin Lakes, lambasted the film under the acerbic title, "Subversive Charm Indeed." They saw the film as politically retrograde, accused it of dismissing Marx in favor of Rousseau, and said it offered up the assurance that it was "all right to drop out

revolutionary struggle, unsparing in its critique of the failures of the European left, but still optimistic about the ability of radicalism, and radical art as well, to transform the world." (2)



Dudley Andrew ends his book, *Mists of Regret*, with a consideration of *Jonah*, and the character of the aging ex-signalman, played by the prolific French actor, Raymond Bussières.

and put your hope in your children."[7] The authors understood the reasons for the film's appeal, but compared the nature of that appeal to an opiate. "It's damned hard to feel very good about anything when decaying capitalism seems so very bent on destroying as much human life as possible," they wrote. And so the film's optimism, they argued, masked an insidious bargain: it flattered the self-satisfaction of a disillusioned liberal audience through the smug, if discrete, disavowal of class politics.

> "Basically we think *Jonah* is a light-weight, slightly progressive, warm and charming film in which petty bourgeois actors and actresses pretend to be workers and peasants but fail because neither they nor Tanner knows much about the daily lives of Swiss workers."





Young women forced to work menial jobs is a recurring leitmotif in Tanner's cinema. But his cinema is far from social realism. The films emphasize the boredom, more than the brutality, of modern work ...





... But this, Tanner suggests, is a brutalism of the spirit. Only daydreams leaven the minutes and hours, which have been flattened and homogenized.

A second, and in my view fairer, criticism they leveled against the film pertained to what they saw as its "blatant, inexcusable sexism." The female characters, they argued, "have no interests beyond their own reproductive organs," and were constructed based on conservative notions of womanhood. There are many conspicuous examples in the film to support this: Marguerite's liaisons with migrant workers; Mathilde's obsession with fertility; Madeleine's pursuit of tantric adventures. "Tanner can claim any excuse he wants," they wrote, "but he has made a movie that shows complete ignorance of women's struggles over the last 10 to 15 years." Stam also expressed dismay at the film's blind spot in this regard, and there is no doubt that the film's sexual politics have aged badly. (As I will return to shortly, this was perhaps the criticism Tanner took most to heart.)





A salient criticism of *Jonah* pertains to its conservative portrayals of womanhood. Men do the thinking while women do the feeling, desiring and reproducing.

Locating the film's politics

In interviews, Tanner took an agnostic stance in relation to the film's politics. "There is no real message here," he said.

> "I'm not trying to tell people what to do or think. I'm not a priest or a politician. *Jonah* is just about what happened to people after 1968. There are some hopes in the film, because the characters are not just sitting back and wanting to belong to the silent majority. They want to move forward, in some small way. They all have some kind of movement, whether it be about kids, or salads, or what to do with one's body, or the problems of work. These characters are all minor prophets and they're headed toward the year 2000."[8]

The language Tanner used to explicate, and justify, the film emerged from the philosophical blueprint he had worked on with Berger. In his highly theoretical



The scene where Max, Marco and Matthieu discuss the post-68 condition.



The closest thing to a plot *Jonah* has is in the possible loss of the farm to a real estate speculator. Max intervenes, demonstrating his ideals remain intact beneath the act of misanthropy and cynicism.



Marguerite imagines the bank speculator abducted and replaced by a pig.

and speculative notes for *Jonah*, Berger called it, “A comedy, sometimes in color and sometimes in black-and-white, about preparing to leave the 20th century.” His analysis of Jonah’s “eight ancestors” demonstrates a lucid awareness of their flaws and contradictions. They are meant to be emblems of personal, post-Utopian possibility, but they are not paragons of the left.

> "In the whale, which is history, there are 8 characters like 8 Jonahs. All of them are *ridiculous*. We must never forget this. They are ridiculous, sometimes stupid, sometimes blind, often dishonest and petty in their obsessions. We must allow that aspect of them which is immediately dismissible by the bourgeois to be fully presented. Yet it is in their ridiculousness that their little prophesies lie. And their prophesies save them from some of the self-destructions and murderous guilt of the society to which they belong. Yet they are not comrades together. They are too individualistic. They bicker and disagree. All that they recognize that they have in common is a certain aberrance."[9]

What is ironic is that the very same characteristics Berger anticipates as being “immediately dismissible” by the bourgeois (e.g. that a boss would object to) were the same which unsettled the critics to the film’s left. *They are too indulgent! Too irresponsible!* To use Berger’s own phrase, *they are ridiculous!*

This is a contradiction the film turns over again and again. Consider the following exchange between Max, Marco and Matthieu, while they chop vegetables for dinner.

> Max: “Because it’s a time of disillusion you go back. Everyone is looking for an escape: the body, nature, sex, onions, lotus flowers. Small consolations in a world which is said to be unchangeable.”
> Marco: “You don't allow for little pleasures?”
> Max: “Little pleasures? Everything's little. Little gimmicks. Little tricks.”
> Marco: “We have to sacrifice for the future. Shit! It's the old trick of revolutions. It's what capitalism has always preached. It's you who is living in the past. You want a new 1905, or 1917, or 1968.”

Shortly after Matthieu, who has been listening while kneading dough, pipes up:

> “You make me sick with all your talking. It's so simple. We work to earn a living. With our work, they make a profit. And with the energy left over we try to fight the system.”

Jonah thus leaves the intellectual aporia of commitment unresolved even while it sides with humble optimism, and the consolations of play, on the level of emotion and tone. A joke or a song is as much the terminus of contradiction as any intellectual synthesis.

The effect can be heartening or off-putting depending on the temperament of the viewer. For the hardliners who believed political cinema meant a realist depiction of the working class or a theorization of revolutionary activity, the effect betrayed naiveté and privilege. For others, it was a healthy sign of youth: the refusal to capitulate to an over-intellectualized bitterness. In a review in *Film Quarterly*, the social critic Todd Gitlin eulogized precisely this aspect of the work.

> “The open secret of the films that Alain Tanner and John Berger have

made is that the characters are *innocent*: without either sin or guile. Their innocence, and the nothing-up-the-sleeves style that attends it, might explain the singular appeal of these films. Although the main characters definitely have histories, they are not encased in them. They tilt toward the future... Unlike other survivors of political failure—Yves Montand's exiled Spanish revolutionary in Resnais's *La Guerre est finie*, for example—they are not toughly stoical, nor are they fixed in their ways: indeed, they hardly have ways to be set in. They are always *underway*...

Therefore these films are challenging to an intelligent and literate audience in the way few contemporary films even try to be. They pose the issue: suppose you really decided to live decently, and deliberately, and with a radical freedom, after 68, after Vietnam, after Nixon—then what?"[10]

The point is that *Jonah* left this question unresolved, and suggested possible avenues ("the body, nature, sex, onions, lotus flowers") that appeared dubious, if not downright offensive, to labor activists who had spent years, sometimes decades, in the trenches of political struggle.







The question of work and play was likely the greatest flashpoint of tension between the worldviews of Berger and Tanner. It is a question—about discipline and fun—that can split the personalities of the left, and remains a dilemma for progressive educational philosophies.

Personal vs. political solutions

What *Jonah* revealed, then, was an historical moment when the boundaries between the political and the personal were in flux. As the traditional class (and party) politics of the left were giving way to a new politics of the body, the land, cultural and sexual identity, lifestyle and the everyday, it was no longer so easy to apply a Manichean moral dualism to political intentions. The hard and fast distinctions between bourgeois culture and progressive culture—at least in the first world—were becoming porous and disorienting. As Madeleine tells Max: "You complicate things, dividing everything in two: the good, the bad, the useful and harmful. You think like a court of law, always judges and lawyers."

Jonah sits, historically, on the fulcrum of political epochs. It crystallized the internal contradictions of the left at a moment when the present day fault-lines were being drawn. And while the macrobiotic, tend-your-own-garden side of the film drew predictable scorn from hard liners, it did touch a prophetic nerve. If hopes for a global Marxist revolution now appear a distant curio of the time, the

nascent lifestyle politics of *Jonah* have only grown in their ubiquity. “So vegetables are politics now!” Max exclaims. How prescient he was! And while the obscene economic inequality of the present stands as proof of the boomer generation’s failure, the broadening of identity and lifestyle politics can be seen to be its greatest accomplishment.

Of course, the doubt–self-liberation or self-indulgence?–runs through to the present. It would be easy, for example, to deride the feel-good idealism of *Jonah* as an ideological precursor of the contemporary “Bobo” class, with its yoga retreats, progressive pre-schools and farm-to-table restaurants. But we must also remember that at the time the film was made, the impulses toward well-being, community and self-fulfillment had not yet been so thoroughly branded. To use the logic of Stam’s defense, the market-driven processes of commodification, status creation and social oppression had yet to so thoroughly contort and betray those desires.









In his speculative notes for the film, Berger remarks that the eight characters are all *ridiculous*. It was the exuberance, playfulness, warmth and camaraderie of *Jonah* that made it so meaningful to so many people.

Whatever its internal contradictions surrounding work and fun, the film does present an essentially anti-capitalist, or at least anti-mercantilist, worldview. Any line that speaks of the logic of the market, of financial speculation, or of game-theoretic rational-choice justifications for dubious behavior, is given to ugly, besuited fat cats. If anything, the film is simplistic in this regard, not ambivalent. The collectively-made and freely-shared are moral virtues. The rationally strategic is bad. No one is trying to impress anyone else, or have an “impact.” In this it is light-years away from the media-savvy, social entrepreneurs of the present.

But a more complex point returns us to the deeper question at the heart of the Berger-Tanner collaboration: the relation between personal experience and political action. Are *Jonah*’s little pleasures liberatory in a way that extends beyond the self? Can they be politicized and put in the service of a larger struggle? Are they opiates for a disillusioned political class or gateway drugs to further political and moral action?

Berger and Tanner were asking this question in their own ways, both separately and together. Tanner’s third film, *Return from Africa*, begins with one version of the riddle: “Speaking words can be an act in itself, it can also be a substitute for action.” Berger’s novel *G.* investigated the same duality through the protean nature of sexual experience. A similar wager—escape or liberation?—might apply to all utopian pockets: from communal living, psychedelic trips, and rainbow festivals to the experience of love and friendship and the decision to have children, a utopian wager on the most personal scale. Are these experiences merely refuges in a fallen world? Do they work like anodyne escape-valves, letting the present order maintain itself? Or are they the personal foundations for action and social change? Will a utopian personal experience engender a corresponding political hope?

There is almost certainly no ready-made or reliable answer to the question. I can see as many examples for the argument as against it. The outcome will vary from person to person. As Octavio Paz has said, “history is unpredictable because its agent, mankind, is the personification of indeterminism.”[11]

That too is my argument for *Jonah*, a film whose indeterminacy grew out of a moment when the historical confidence of the left had evaporated. Without the assurances of ideology, individuals were placed back in their local environments to create solutions to smaller, much more delimited and personal problems. Is this localism a betrayal of politics? Or is it a sensible correction of what turned out to be a too facile understanding of progress? We still live with this uncertainty.

But I would go one step further. In our contemporary age when the logic and pressures of the market have pervaded nearly every inch of human life, the small,

human gestures of *Jonah* provide, if not the tools for revolution, then the reasons not to submit. “What is the purpose of resisting corporate globalization,” Rebecca Solnit has asked, “if not to protect the obscure, the ineffable, the unmarketable, the unmanageable, the local, the poetic and the eccentric?” The word that unites the rest, at least in my view, is *protect*. We live at a time when plans for global revolution are obsolete. Austerity politics threaten livelihoods and ways of life. Accordingly, we have moved, out of necessity, to a politics of resistance: of preservation and survival.

Berger and Tanner after *Jonah*







Tanner’s films from the 1980s were the emotional inversions of his films from the early 1970s. They explored themes of solitude, desperation, anhedonia and detachment. (A) *Messidor* (B) *Dans la ville blanche* (C) *Une flame dans mon coeur*

It is one thing to be attacked from the right; quite another to be attacked from the left. Although Berger and Tanner have remained close friends, *Jonah* was their last collaboration. It marked both the pinnacle of their partnership and its final step: an act of a synthesis that was also an impasse.

In the years that followed, Tanner entered a depression. He emerged from this with the incredibly bitter film, *Messidor* (1979), about two lesbian runaways. (The film served as the inspiration for *Thelma and Louise*.) In a sense, Tanner responded directly to the feminist criticisms of *Jonah*. Whether he thought about his own work this way or not, his entire subsequent trajectory might be seen as a protracted wrestling with the accusations of sexism and naiveté that *Jonah* provoked. In the 1980s, his films explored destructive female anti-heroes and anhedonic, disoriented men. Despair replaced gleeful irreverence. By 1985, Serge Daney, who had praised *Jonah* at the time of its release, could write of Tanner’s films:

> "I knew the characters ... having seen them come and go: they were flawed and bad in '68, then armchair idealists, then, in '85, embittered, dissatisfied hippies, that's all."[12]

The assessment is harsh, but it does speak to a dwindling in Tanner’s later work—an inability to match the energy and inspiration of his early films.

Berger, for his part, emerged from *Jonah* heading in a very different direction. He moved from Geneva to a small village in the Haute Savoie, and toward a direct engagement with the day-to-day experience of French agrarian workers. In this sense, his trajectory can be seen to respond to a separate criticism leveled at *Jonah*: that its makers did not truly understand the lives of the working class, that they were nothing but class-imposters, “pretending to be workers and peasants.”

In fact, Berger had always been fascinated by working men and women, which likely made the accusations about the privileged consciousness of *Jonah* even more stinging. In conversation today, he plays down his role in the film, while holding up his collaboration with Jean Mohr from the same period, *A Seventh Man*, about migrant laborers, as the book of which he is proudest. In the years since the mid-1970s, the dignity of work, the importance of survival rather than progress, and the continued presence of the dead have all became central elements to his worldview, almost a theology. The title of his trilogy on peasant life, spanning two decades of writing, is taken from the Gospel of John: “Others have labored / and ye are entered into their labours.” For many contemporary readers, including myself, this is this period that signifies the Berger we most admire: an honorary world elder and spiritual lodestar of the anti-globalization movement.







Berger worked with the Swiss photographer, Jean Mohr, on three books including *A Seventh Man* (1975), the book he says he is proudest of. The montage-inspired photo-text documents the experience of migrant laborers in Europe. (Stills from *Another Way of Telling,* BBC, Dir. John Christie, 1989)

A fleeting marriage of contradictions

For a brief window in the 1970s, Tanner's and Berger's purposes overlapped. They made films that were unique in spirit, tone, energy and ideas. They tried to encompass the theoretical complexities of commitment, rebellion and idealism in the face of political closure, while also doing justice to the lived experience of those complexities. Although certain aspects of their films have grown more awkward and problematic with time, others have become more revolutionary. Assigning a political "score" to a film, like carats to a diamond, will never be as important as taking from that work what can be of value to the present, and leaving behind what cannot.

And so what remains radical about *Jonah* is its sense of connection. It refused to separate feeling from thought, songs from lectures, or politics from the attendant, smaller acts of friendship and community that can both beget and cement political ideals. At a time when miserabilism has become the default manner of the avant-garde and social documentaries have fallen back on stereotyped modes of persuasion, the lessons *Jonah* provides, notwithstanding its flaws, are needed now more than ever. It has always been our duty to distinguish hope from fantasy. But as fear gushes out of the media like water from a tap, there is something all the more relevant about *Jonah*'s little pleasures. Or as Tanner put it recently in conversation, people are still searching for *un peu d'espoir, un peu d'utopie*—a little bit of hope, a piece of utopia.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. John Berger, "Look at Britain!", *Sight and Sound* 21:1 (1957), p. 14. [return to text]

2. George Melly, "Layers of Meaning," *The Observer*, January 28, 1973, p. 33.

3. A draft of this script, along with their correspondence, can be found in the Berger Archives at the British Library.

4. I am quoting from a copy of the letters kept in the same Berger Archive.

5. David Denby, "The greening of Alain Tanner," *The Boston Phoenix*, December 7, 1976. (Accessed via Cinefiles: https://cinefiles.bampfa.berkeley.edu/cinefiles/DocDetail?docId=20249) [return to page 2]

6. Robert Stam, "The subversive charm of Alain Tanner," *Jump Cut*, no. 15, 1977. http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC15folder/JonahStam.html

7. Linda Greene, John Hess, and Robin Lakes, "Subversive charm indeed!" *Jump Cut*, no. 15, 1977. http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC15folder/JonahAgainst.html

8. Quoted in Judy Klemesrud, "Alain Tanner: 'Art is to Break with the Past'," The New York Times, October 24, 1976, p. 87.

9. Here I am quoting from a dossier on *Jonah* kept in the Berger Archives at the British Library.

10. Todd Gitlin, "Reviews: Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000," *Film Quarterly*, Spring 1977, pp. 36-37.

11. Octavio Paz, "In Search of the Present," Nobel Lecture, December 8, 1990. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1990/paz-lecture.html

12. Serge Daney, review of *No Man's Land* in *Libération*, August 30, 1985, quoted in Frederic Bas, "The subtle subversion of Alain Tanner," Swiss Films Director's Sheet. http://www.swissfilms.ch/static/files/cineportraits/44_Tanner_en.pdf

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Special section: trans media

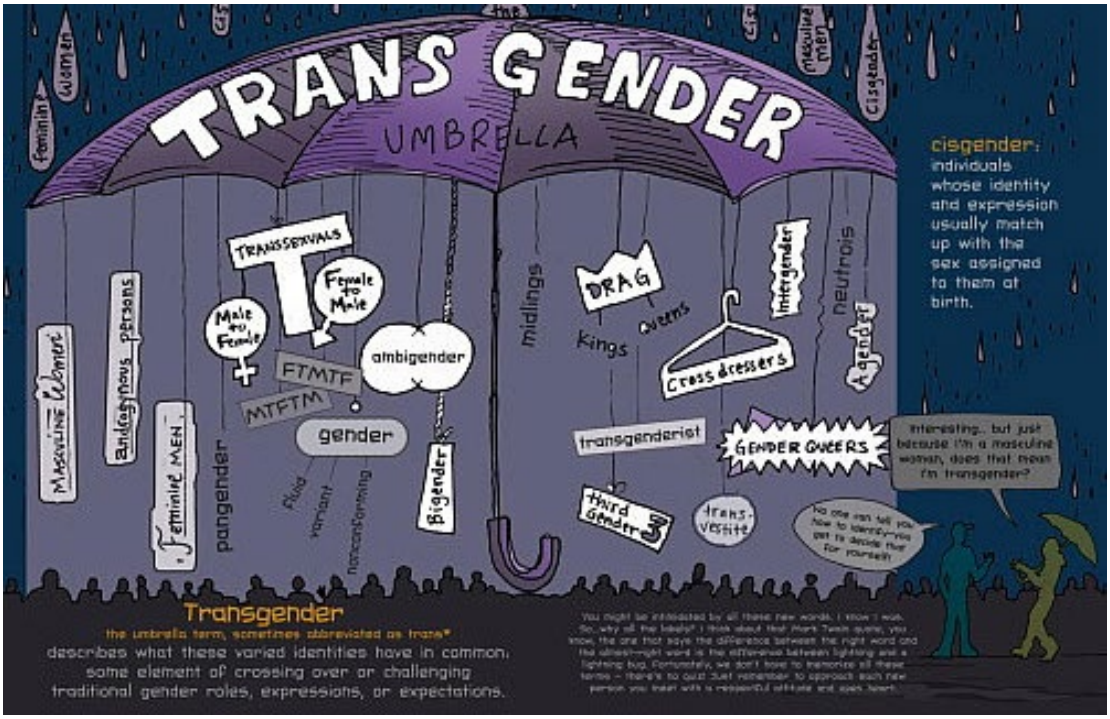
Introduction:
Troubling transgender media — fact, fiction, and compromise

by Alexandra Juhasz

> "Beginnings are delicate times when the foundation stones of the edifice you're building are still visible; maybe if we take a look around now, we can save ourselves some trouble later."—Sandy Stone

So starts Sandy Stone's entry "Guerilla," one of 86 short entries revolving around a keyword commissioned for the inaugural issue of *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*.[1] [open notes in new window] Of course, Stone's words commence this effort as well, and the editors of *TSQ,* Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, explain these keywords' use at yet another threshold: "While far from providing a complete picture of the field, these keywords begin to elucidate a conceptual vocabulary for transgender studies."[2] Across my introduction, I will quote extensively from these keyword entries,[3] putting to good use a vocabulary first penned by trans-theorists and activists who now sit on the legitimizing pages of *TLQ* under the "umbrella" of the still forming field of transgender studies:

> "In the two past decades, the umbrella diagram has spread nationally (United States) and internationally to become a widely utilized educational tool. Given that its original purpose was for political advocacy, the image suggests sheltering trans-identified and gender-nonconforming individuals from the hard rain of discrimination. By gathering nonnormative sex and gender terms underneath its canopy, the umbrella visually casts an aggregative categorical imaginary that includes all sex/ual and gender-nonconforming identities and expressions. In so doing, the umbrella implies that all formations of sex and gender are not only possible but also taxonomically containable."[4]



From the GENDER book: http://www.thegenderbook.com/.

Of note in all of these initiations is the value of delicacy, self-awareness, transition and reflexivity at the formation of a new scholarly discipline. “Keep in mind that no one working in transgender studies has a degree in transgender studies,” Stone cautions.[5] Exactly. As a cis-gender,[6] queer, feminist media scholar and activist with a long history of commitments to AIDS, anti-racist, and techno-feminist pursuits, I take all these overtures and precautions to heart. That is to say, I listen to and learn from trans-scholars—commencing with Stone, Stryker, Currah, and Singer—about the critical importance of reflecting upon ones own position within a field and the world, the real pleasures and dangers of institutional disavowal or sanction, and the methodological, personal and political stakes for ones work under this umbrella and within this new field.

I was around (with many of the founders of trans studies, too) for the formation of at least two other academic fields—queer studies and AIDS media studies. We have learned from these earlier experiences that with institutional authorization (like a journal published by Duke University Press, or a set of articles published in *Jump* Cut) comes both opportunity and calcification, support and standardization. If we “look around” here at this beginning, as Stone suggests, we see that I introduce four essays, penned by graduate students, a junior scholar, and activist mediamaker in dialogue with me; only two of us are trans. This introduction offers a frame of entry but also one of approval, recognition, professional authority and disciplinary distance and difference (which is why the graduate students and journal invited me to write it in the first place: that’s how disciplines work, from senior to junior, from inside to the peripheries). “The trajectory for discipline building is well understood,” continues Stone.

> “In Phase One, individuals, geographically scattered and usually unaware of each other, generate the rough ideas of what will become the discipline.”[7]

For committed scholars and their allies, first there will be meetings at bars, and parties, and demos, and hospital beds: informal, political, social, practical, and outside or alongside one’s professional scholarly life. For example, in 1986, newly arrived in NYC to attend graduate school in Cinema Studies, I attended one of the

first demonstrations of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) as an interested activist who also happened to be going to school. This quickly led me to the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) where I volunteered to make video. I showed my AIDS activist tapes within community and movement settings, but then also eventually at graduate school, and then at scholarly conferences because the ideas of my discipline proved to be live in this work as well, and I began to become aware of others, inside and outside academia, thinking about both AIDS and camcorder video.

> "In Phase Two, others become aware of this work and may become aware of each other. … In Phase Three, a few people with the necessary energy and drive come together, geographically or, as is more usual, virtually, and organize the first publications, meetings, and, later, conferences."[8]

AIDS media scholarship and then queer scholarship followed these well-trod paths, which also then led to monographs (including my own, *AIDS TV* [Duke 1995] that came from my doctoral dissertation), which in turn methodically refer to this growing body of work and spawn reading lists and other requirements, job opportunities to teach and refine this trajectory, and journals (or sections) devoted to the unique questions, methods, histories and personas of a consolidating discipline. A good many of the first voices in Trans Studies cut their teeth, as did I, in feminist, AIDS and/or queer studies and continue to contribute to these and other disciplines.[9] But Trans Media Studies grows from, is related to, and differs from these disciplinary trajectories:

> "Susan Stryker once quipped that transgender studies is queer theory's 'evil twin' who 'willfully disrupts the privileged family narratives that favor sexual identity labels . . . over gender categories' (2004: 212). The notion of trans cinema bears a similar sibling relation to that of queer cinema. Films that feature gender variance have always had a significant place in queer cinema, but considerations of trans issues have tended to be subsumed under the focus on sexuality."[10]

And here's where and why some of the required delicacy, self-awareness, and reflexivity must stay at play. While I am a feminist, queer scholar, I am neither trans nor central to the formation of this field. Rather, I read, watch and learn from the development of transsexual studies (while also contributing to its growth here) as a media studies scholar fully committed to "Human Rights" (see below) that are visible, live, and contested for transpeople in America and internationally at this moment (for instance, the various "bathroom bills" in the United States and the robust discussion of this issue on the Internet and in our political landscape, or the U.S. military's recent recognition of trans soldiers; but also the constant and less visible threats to trans people in the form of harassment, violence, and stigma).

> "The hitherto dominant and globalized Western medical-psychiatric perspective, which defines gender-variant/trans people as a deviation of an apparently natural binary gender order and thus pathologizes and stigmatizes them is being challenged by a new set of discourses (and engagements) (Balzer 2010). This new perspective is centered on the social and legal situation of gender-variant/trans people, which is marked by severe human rights violations. On a global scale, these violations encompass, among others: severe forms of hate violence, including hate killings, rape, and torture; criminalization and prosecution of so-called cross-dressing, so-called cross-gender behavior, and gender reassignment surgery; and prosecution that especially targets trans/gender-variant people without legal basis or

> based on legislation and legal measures designed for other purposes, such as antiprostitution, antihomosexuality, loitering, or nuisance laws."[11]

Furthermore, I am personally and intellectually curious about and stimulated by the theories, methods, and activist strategies, as well as objects of inquiry and "capacities" (see below) that this field sets into play:

> "Transgender epistemologies and theoretical models fundamentally remap the study of human cultures. Their recognition of the mutable and multiple conditions of the apparatus we know as gender has wide-ranging consequences. That is, once gender is understood to be temporal, successive, or transformable, all accounts of human lives look different and more complex."[12]

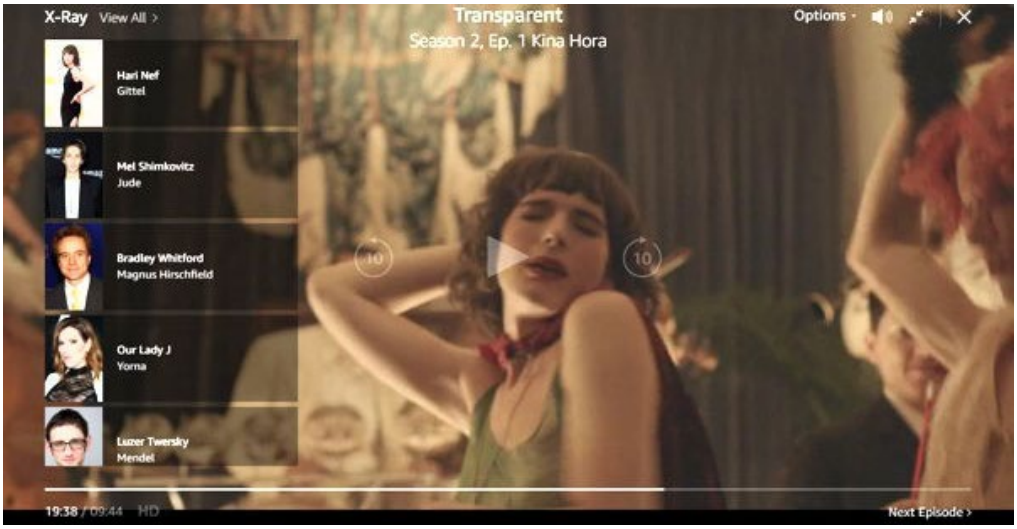
We see a good deal of this disciplinary difference and complexity here. The four scholarly/activist projects that follow in this section (three of which aligned first at the 2016 meetings of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies), exemplify where transgender studies is today: a "fragile" moment "heady and bursting with possibilities."[13] In fact, there has been a quick, powerful consolidation of scholars, visibility and verbosity moving from Stone's Phases One through Three and resulting in our current phase, one marked by an increasing professionalization, mounting possibilities for new thinking and practice (see my conversation with activist media maker Sam Feder, for example), as well as for the worrisome effects of commodification, calcification or jargon. Stryker and Currah note that a consolidating transgender studies:

> "considers the work that the term transgender does: tracing the genealogy of 'transgender' as a category; documenting and debating the consequences of its rapid deployment in a wide range of contexts; and interrogating the ways in which it can function (sometimes simultaneously) as a pathway of resistance or liberation, as a mechanism for surveillance and control, or as a neutrally descriptive technical term in an analytics of emergent cultural phenomena."[14]



Participants twitter about reality TV show *I Am Cait*.

The following constellation of essays, conversations, and scholarly-art work demonstrates the expansiveness of this moment for Trans Studies in every aspect: our people, our objects and methods of study, the stakes of our work. The authors who follow are trans, cis-gender, queer, female and male; we look at transmedia, quality tv, low-brow reality television, activist media, and trans representations historically in dominant and alternative media; we engage in theory/identity-based game-making, speculative textual analysis, conversation about the role and uses of trans media activism, and the study of expanding genres, audiences and texts for new media. We share a project that seeks to better understand where and how trans is lived, seen, and deployed in contemporary and past media. We believe our words contribute to resistance through knowledge, communal research and shared authoring as we open out Trans Studies to include our thinking about creative labor, communal social media activism, the trans tipping point, and trans of color poetics.



Online "extras" for TV show *Transparent*.

Across the four projects we observe and try to understand and/or produce ourselves a quickly increasing trans visibility (the tipping point that Feder and I discuss extensively) and consider how this might function both as liberation or control. To do so, the four contributions engage in disciplinary expansion: does the visible trans subject change the nature of texts, seeing, activism, knowing? In our conversation, Feder and I discuss their research for a documentary on the history of trans visibility in dominant and alternative media. We consider the lingering and disenabling tropes that have defined this terrain, most notably the "traumatic rupture" that cements most representational efforts. We also mull the costs and benefits of increasing trans visibility and trouble the role of media images, visibility, and making in connection with trans activism.

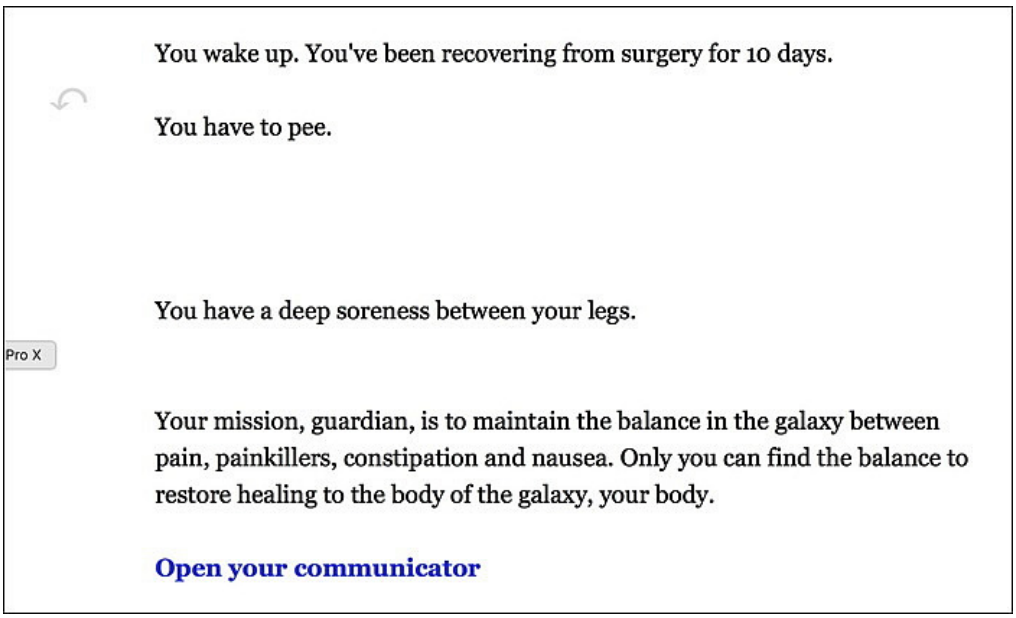


Kate Bornstein and Sam Feder discuss *Kate Bornstein is a Queer & Pleasant Danger* (Sam Feder, 2014)

In "Seeing Double: Visibility, Alternative Temporality, and Transfeminine History in *Transparent*," Nicole Erin Morse works to perceive and name the visible and invisible creative labor practices of transfeminine producers in contemporary media while thinking more comprehensively about the political or structural role of evidentiary visibility. For her contribution, micha cárdenas gives us "Dilating Destiny," an experimental documentary game that invites players to navigate through cárdenas' experiences recovering from gender confirmation surgery in the midst of ongoing violence against black people known to her and us through her "communicator," something akin to a computer with Internet connectivity. Morse writes that the project draws "out questions of trans of color praxis, experience, and visibility. cárdenas situates 'Dilating Destiny' through her theoretical concept of the 'transreal,' raising questions about the politics of documentary form and the perils of the binary of fiction/non-fiction."

Dan Udy, too, raises questions about the use and abuse of the "real," as well as the contemporary possibilities for (trans) politics of visibility enabled by social media. In his "Keeping it Real: Genre & Politics on *I Am Cait*," he attends to a "complex power dynamic amongst *I Am Cait*'s network of participants and producers," and by so doing thinks out new strategies for communal media activism from within and beyond mainstream systems of television and digital representation. In the variety of approaches and media objects under consideration in our shared effort, we see in action Stone's prediction for the possibilities for establishing fields: new subjects and methods of scholarly inquiry allow us to understand older methods, genres, and even systems of knowing as sometimes useful and for other purposes, limited, compromised, and not expansive enough to hold what we know, what we make, what we want, how we see. Stone writes, "we have barely begun, really, to explore how powerful trans—born in the joy and pain of living bodies and fully engaged in the world—can be."[15] We contribute to that beginning here, opening

out into troubling trans media.



micha cárdenas' experimental documentary game, *Dilating Destiny*

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Notes

1. Sandy Stone, "Guerilla," *TSQ* 2014 Volume 1, Number 1-2*:* 92. [return to text]

2. Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, "Introduction," *TSQ* 2014 Volume 1, Number 1-2*:* 1-18.

3. If you are new to and interested in this field, its media, history, key players and debates, I highly recommend reading all 86 keywords which provide an exciting introduction to a once loosely affiliated and recently more contained body of people, work, affiliations, and political projects. See: http://tsq.dukejournals.org/content/1/1-2/77.full.pdf.

4. T. Benjamin Singer, "Umbrella," *TSQ* 2014 Volume 1, Number 1-2: 259. Also see, Cristan Williams, "Transgender." *TSQ* 2014 Volume 1, Number 1-2: 232-234.

5. Stone: 92.

6. "The term cisgender (from the Latin cis-, meaning "on the same side as") can be used to describe individuals who possess, from birth and into adulthood, the male or female reproductive organs (sex) typical of the social category of man or woman (gender) to which that individual was assigned at birth. Hence a cisgender person's gender is on the same side as their birth-assigned sex, in contrast to which a trans- gender person's gender is on the other side (trans-) of their birth-assigned sex." B. Aultman, "Cisgender," *TSQ*: 61.

7. Stone: 92.

8. Stone: 93.

9. See Sally Hines, "Feminism," Heather Love, "Queer," Van Bailey, "Brown Bois," and Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, "Translatinas/os," *TSQ* 2014 Volume 1, Number 1-2.

10. Helen Hok-Sze Leung, "Film," *TSQ* 2014 Volume 1, Number 1-2: 85. See also, Jian Chen and Lissette Olivares, "Transmedia": 245-248.

11. Carsten Balzer and Carla Lagata, "Human Rights," *TSQ* 2014 Volume 1, Number 1-2: 100.

12. David Getsy, "Capacity," *TSQ* 2014 Volume 1, Number 1-2: 48.

13. Sandy Stone. "Guerilla," *TSQ* 2014 Volume 1, Number 1-2*:* 92-95.

14. Susan Stryker and Paisley Currah, "Introduction," *TSQ* 2014 Volume 1, Number 1-2*:* 1-18.

15. Stone: 94.



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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Seeing double:visibility, temporality, and transfeminine history in *Transparent*

by Nicole Erin Morse



Zackary Drucker and Holly Woodlawn in *She Gone Rogue* (2012). [courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Gallery Los Angeles]



Transfeminine history emerges as an alternative, nonlinear temporality in *Transparent*, when a modern day hora at Sarah's wedding transports the viewer to Berlin in 1933, introducing Gittel (Hari Nef), Maura's transfeminine ancestor (Season 2, episode 1).



At the Chicago premiere of her independent television pilot, *Southern For Pussy* (2015), trans artist Zackary Drucker described a conversation she had with transfeminine pioneer and Warhol muse Holly Woodlawn. Drucker said that Woodlawn commented, "you are our future," and in response, Drucker replied, "No, you are my future." Rather than the linear, unidirectional time that J. Halberstam has dubbed "straight time,"[1] [open endnotes in new window] the future of transfeminine history that Drucker describes is mutual and multiple. Or, as Drucker put it that evening, the future "goes both ways." In Amazon's *Transparent*,[2] transfeminine history emerges as precisely this kind of multidirectional, multifaceted relationship between past, present, and future. Moreover, this vision of history is created through a striking practice of double casting actors in multiple roles in flashbacks that extend from Los Angeles in 1994 to 1930s Berlin. Although she was not directly responsible for this casting decision, as a producer on the show Drucker herself has been closely involved with *Transparent*'s depiction of transfeminine history. Moreover, double casting is used in *Transparent* to explore themes that Drucker addresses through doubling in her independent work, including intergenerational connections and transfeminine history.

In this article, I examine how *Transparent* uses doubling as an aesthetic strategy, hypothesizing that Drucker's artistic contribution to the show might be located in this use of doubling, and believing that the alternative temporality of interpretive scholarship itself enables a "look back" that might be able to make trans creative labor visible. This intervention seems necessary, for while she is credited as an associate producer or co-producer, and despite her own formidable artistic credentials, Drucker is typically described as a "trans consultant" for the show,[3] a description that suggests that her primary contribution is educating the cast and crew about the lives and experiences of trans women. In other words, her contribution is reduced to her life experience, which effectively sets aside her talent, creativity, education, and vision. Yet although both Drucker's independent work and *Transparent* use doubling to make transfeminine history visible, my attempt to excavate evidence of her artistic influence through close analysis of *Transparent*'s use of doubling is ultimately inconclusive, raising questions about the evidentiary potential of visuality. Furthermore, visibility itself is a double-edged sword in relation to media by and about trans people, given that the transphobic trope of the genital reveal is an extreme example of an epistemology of vision, in which knowledge is made available through sight. In this trope, perhaps exemplified most viscerally by the reveal scene in Neil Jordan's *The Crying Game* (1992), the truth of a trans person's identity is assumed to be found



Double casting links Rose in 1933 (played by Emily Robinson and shown here beside her sister Gittel in Season 2, episode 8) to Young Ali in 1994 (also played by Robinson and shown here beside her sister Sarah in Season 1, episode 8).

in their genitals. The trope of the reveal assumes that truth can only be accessed by looking "under the surface" for proof.

Provocatively, *Transparent* provides a particularly complex case study of how "looking under the surface" can function as a mode of spectatorship. For viewers of *Transparent*, including myself, information about the series' double casting is made visible through Amazon's new "X-Ray" feature.



This screenshot shows the X-Ray overlay, which highlights the actors appearing in the scene below, as well as the music featured in the episode.

This data-base driven feature is available for much, though not all, of Amazon's streaming video, and it can be opened with a simple gesture. By dragging a finger or a mouse across the screen, the viewer can instantly access production information about the scene, including, in the case of *Transparent*, headshots of the double-cast actors. Through providing this instant overlay of otherwise suppressed information, X-Ray transforms scenes from narrative media into opportunities for analysis, categorization, and new modes of spectatorial control and investigation. As such, X-Ray lives up to its name, which recalls the long history of medical images that both represent and actually produce our relationship to the body.[4] Moreover, because of the values programmed into X-Ray, Drucker's own contribution disappears once again, since the feature is scripted to prioritize the visible bodies of the actors over the invisible labor that takes place offscreen.

Transparent: context, reception, and trans creative labor

Created by Soloway after her own parent came out as trans, *Transparent* follows Maura Pfefferman and her family as she transitions, exploring a variety of issues related to what is hidden and what is revealed, issues that extend far beyond the transitioning parent referenced in the series' punning title. Although gender identity is initially the predominant theme of the show, Jewish identity[5] quickly emerges as an equally critical site of exploration, tension, history, and doubling.

As Maura transitions, her youngest child, Ali, begins simultaneously exploring a genderqueer identity and researching family history, investigating the way epigenetic trauma effects the descendants of Holocaust survivors, including the Pfeffermans. Meanwhile, Maura's son, Josh, gets engaged to a rabbi and has to confront both the harm of childhood sexual abuse and his own lack of spiritual identity. While the other central storylines deal less directly with questions of Jewish identity, both the eldest daughter Sarah and Maura's ex-wife Shelley are shown to be seeking significance and direction in life, and at moments each woman seeks guidance from people at the temple. Although the family is deeply dysfunctional, the series rarely positions Maura's transition as a symptom of this dysfunction. Instead, both family members and outsiders assert that "secrets" are the source of the Pfeffermans' problems, emphasizing the series' pervasive interest in revealing what lies hidden beneath the surface.

Although the decision to cast Jeffrey Tambor as Maura has courted controversy,[6] the series has also been positively received, both within the entertainment industry and within the LGBTQ community. Winning two Golden Globes in 2015, *Transparent* made history as the first online series to win the Golden Globe for best series,[7] and helped establish Amazon's video streaming service as a major competitor to Netflix and Hulu.[8] Yet perhaps as a result of its groundbreaking success and its empathetic, three-dimensional representation of an older transgender woman, *Transparent* has primarily been discussed through the lens of industry history and through what Stuart Hall has described as the "politics of representation,"[9] neglecting formal aesthetic analysis of the show's artistry and, in particular, the creative labor of its trans cast and crew members. In considerations of the work of marginalized artists, critiques that emphasize the experience of a marginalized identity over aesthetic questions are not unusual; Darby English points out that work by black artists is too often simplistically understood as so many representations of "an abstract and unchanging" essence, ignoring the specific formal strategies and interventions of individual works.[10] For English, this tendency towards generalization, in which works by black artists are understood to be merely examples of some coherent and unifying identity, impoverishes both criticism and creative practice, and demands new approaches.[11] Although English primarily discusses single-author art works, his argument also holds true when analyzing the distributed authorship of television, in which people with marginalized identities are too often reduced to their identities through the role of "consultant."

The queer press has discussed how trans artists contribute to *Transparent*, yet even these analyses usually emphasize the politics of representation and the work of the trans consultant, focusing on how accurately the series represents trans people rather than *how* such representation functions aesthetically. In an early review, *Pink News* describes the many different ways that trans people were involved in the production of the first season, stating that the presence of trans artists both on and off screen "ensure[s] issues were portrayed as honestly as possible."[12] Writing in *The Advocate*, Cael Keegan asserts more cynically that the presence of trans cast and crew members serves as a shield against criticism of the show's politics, stating that *Transparent* "seems to have gotten trans representation 'right,' or at least, politically correct."[13] *Autostraddle.com*'s trans editor, Mey Rude, addresses both on-screen representation and economic representation in her description of *Transparent*'s efforts to incorporate trans artists in every aspect of the show's production. Rude writes that "*Transparent* is hoping to create a new trend in Hollywood. One where trans people get to be a part of their own stories, where trans people get a piece of the money that's being made off of their struggles."[14] But although representational accuracy and economic justice are critical issues, an exclusive focus on the politics of representation overlooks the creative labor of trans artists like Drucker.



In *She Gone Rogue* (2012), Drucker (center) stages a meeting between her character and the drag pageant organizer Flawless Sabrina (right, and reflected left). The film not only features intergenerational doubling, but it also gestures towards transfeminine history through the setting of Flawless Sabrina's apartment. Preserved in the film, the apartment is full of art and archival material that has since become part of the Flawless Sabrina Archive thanks to the efforts of

Drucker, Flawless Sabrina, and Diana Tourjee.

Trans artists as trans consultants

When trans consultants offer their expertise to media producers, their labor is often narrowly understood as a means of authenticating media about trans people[15] and as a strategic compromise that allows trans consultants access to steady employment.[16] These interpretations assume that trans consultants play an informational rather than a creative role, an assumption that seems unwarranted at best in the case of *Transparent*, since the show employs trans consultants who are artists in their own right. Indeed, in describing the role that he and Zackary Drucker play on *Transparent*, Rhys Ernst says that their responsibilities extend well beyond "shepherding the politics of representation," as they are involved with writing, hiring, casting, production, and postproduction. As Ernst points out, the term "trans consultant" obscures the fact that he is a filmmaker himself; meanwhile, Drucker works across media in photography, video, and performance art, and the two were featured together in the 2014 Whitney Biennial. Although in other cases, such as the feature film *The Danish Girl* (2015), the work of trans consultants seems to be circumscribed by representational politics and historical accuracy,[17] Drucker's and Ernst's role on *Transparent* seems open to other possibilities.



Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, *Relationship* (2008-2013). [courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Gallery Los Angeles]

As I have discussed elsewhere, Drucker's artistic practice consistently emerges from collaboration, explores transfeminine history, and repeatedly features the image of the mirror and the figure of the double. Her long-standing collaboration with Ernst is no exception. Before their work on *Transparent*, Drucker and Ernst collaborated on the short film *She Gone Rogue* (2012) and a photography series, *Relationship* (2008–2013). In both of these projects, themes of collaboration and transfeminine history emerge through imagery of mirroring and doubling. For example, in *She Gone Rogue*, Drucker doubles herself through false eyeline matches in scenes reminiscent of the work of feminist filmmaker Maya Deren, and her character is metaphorically doubled by transfeminine pioneers Holly Woodlawn, Vaginal Davis, and Flawless Sabrina. Meanwhile, in *Relationship*, Drucker and Ernst double each other in androgynous selfies and stark silhouettes.





In these two images from *She Gone Rogue*, Vaginal Davis gives Drucker "the sacred vagina dentata," which Drucker then passes on to Flawless Sabrina.





False eyeline matches allow Drucker to look at herself, chase herself, and flee herself as Darling and Darling's doppelganger in *She Gone Rogue*.

Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, *Relationship* (2008-2013).
[courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Gallery Los Angeles]





Drucker also explores doubling in collaborations with her mother, Penny Sori, and her mentor, Flawless Sabrina. In *FISH: A Matrilineage of Cunty White-Woman Realness* (2008), mother and daughter mirroreach other in highly stylized framings against a hot pink background, while in *Southern For Pussy*, the two double each other once again, albeit more naturalistically. Drucker's long-standing collaboration with Flawless Sabrina includes her short film *At Least You Know You Exist* (2011), which shows Drucker and Flawless Sabrina doubling each other. Furthermore, this film pairs the aesthetic strategy of doubling with invocations of queer temporality. While the ghostly texture of the 16mm footage, in the intentionally imperfect digital transfer, evokes the fragmentation of transfeminine history, Drucker's voice periodically repeats the statement "god knows if we're going forward or back."



In *Southern for Pussy* (2015), mother and daughter continue to double each other through their physical resemblance and through their poses, without the stylized makeup of *FISH*.





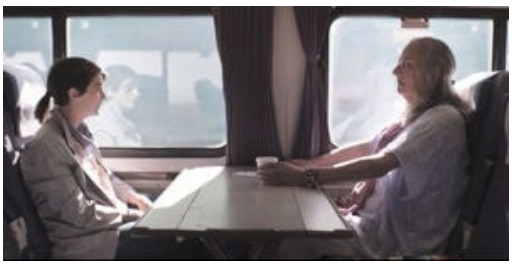
In matching wigs and makeup, Drucker and Penny Sori interrupt each other, both aurally and visually, as they finish and pervert each other's statements, in *FISH* (2008). [courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Gallery Los Angeles]





Zackary Drucker and Flawless Sabrina in *At Least You Know You Exist* (2011). [courtesy of the artist and Luis De Jesus Gallery Los Angeles]





Although Ali does not exclusively dress in clothing that is gendered masculine, several scenes put Maura (Jeffrey Tambor) and Ali (Gaby Hoffman) side-by-side showing their simultaneous but opposite shifts in gender presentation (Season 2, episode 1; Season 2, episode 10)

Going forward and back in *Transparent*

In the work I describe above, Drucker uses aesthetic strategies commonly employed in the fine arts and art cinema, such as composition and editing, to explore collaboration, intergenerational doubling, and transfeminine history. In *Transparent*, however, these themes emerge again, through a strategy is unusual in mainstream television: double casting.[18] Double casting connects two of the show's threads with which Drucker is reported to have been closely involved: the 8th episode of Season 1, titled "Best New Girl;" and the subplot in Season 2 that reveals a transfeminine ancestor in the family's history. In both cases, Drucker's involvement is documented primarily through her own reports and accounts from other cast and crew. In interviews and public presentations,[19] she and Ernst describe their role as including everything from providing notes on scripts, to casting many of the queer and trans roles, to offering feedback on rough cuts. According to Drucker, "there are entire plot points that we've seen through from the beginning," and in Drucker's case, she contributed to the plot, script, wardrobe, and casting of "Best New Girl." Of the Berlin subplot in Season 2, she says, with a pun on the gender neutral pronoun "hir," that she was involved in "shaping the hirstorical context, and casting, as always."[20]

The first two seasons of *Transparent* reveal that Maura and Ali have a strong bond, a link that becomes especially evident as Ali begins exploring a genderqueer identity. Furthermore, both "Best New Girl" and the Season 2 subplot reveal that this connection is not only a connection between this mother and this child, but also a connection between these two family members and the family's past. Across Season 1, *Transparent* moves between current events and the summer of 1994, when Maura begins exploring her identity seriously. "Best New Girl" largely takes place in 1994, when Maura's children are all in their teens, and this episode explores a variety of significant relationships that develop one weekend when Ali cancels her bat mitzvah. Maura takes advantage of the change of plans and escapes to a camp for cross-dressers. When Drucker discusses this episode, she

notes how critical she thought it was to capture the historical tension between those who identified as male cross-dressers and those who, like Maura, would transition.[21]

At the camp, Maura and her friend Marcy meet Connie, the supportive wife of one of the campers, and eventually this friendship leads to a climactic scene in which Maura and Connie drink, flirt, and dance. While Maura is at the camp, young Ali is left to her own devices, and she encounters a genderqueer role model in Jules, the bat mitzvah caterer. As these two storylines play out through parallel editing, we enter into the relationships that Maura and Ali are developing, while also becoming deeply familiar with the faces of the actors who realize these storylines: Emily Robinson, who plays a 13-year-old Ali, Michaela Watkins, who plays Connie, and Bradley Whitford, who plays Maura's friend Marcy. Our familiarity with these faces will become important in Season 2, when all three actors return, double cast as Pfefferman ancestors and their friends in Berlin in 1933.



Maura's friend Marcy (Bradley Whitford) introduces Maura to transvestite culture, but in "Best New Girl," Marcy is shown to be deeply attached to preserving the distinction between trans women and men who cross dress. This distinction between the two friends' attitudes towards feminine gender presentation is partly indicated by clothing, hair, and makeup, as Maura's appearance tends towards a more naturalistic look, while Marcy's outfits appear more like costumes.



When Connie (Michaela Watkins) and Maura meet in "Best New Girl," the intimacy of their interactions, particularly the moments in which they look at each other, offers insight into Maura's emerging trans lesbian identity.





This charged encounter between Young Ali and Jules (Mel Shimkovitz) gives additional context to Ali's experimentation with gender throughout Season 1 (Season 1, episode 8).



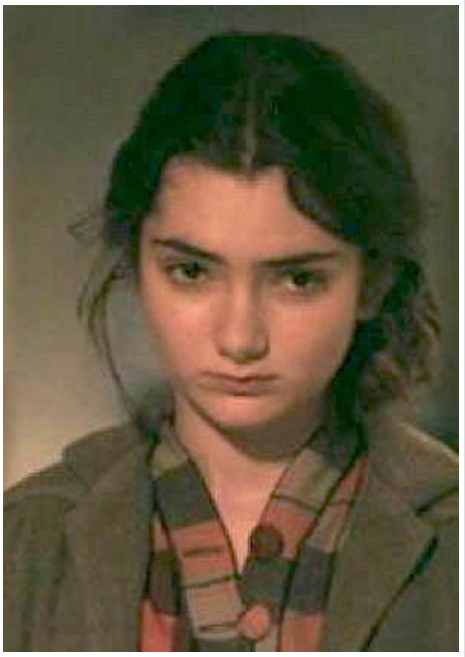
Through the technique of double casting, a technique more common in theater than in television, the faces of these actors haunt the family. This produces a network of intergenerational connections in the historical subplot woven throughout Season 2. In this season, the family's Weimar Germany past intersects with stories unfolding in the present, as Ali researches epigenetic trauma and seeks to understand how the Holocaust continues to affect her family. Emily Robinson goes from playing young Ali to playing Maura's mother, Rose, a young girl struggling to cope with a fractured family as she supports her trans sister, Gittel. Michaela Watkins no longer plays Maura's love interest, and instead appears as Maura's grandmother, Yetta, a woman who loves her children but cannot accept that one of her children is a trans woman. And Bradley Whitford,



As Gittel, Hari Nef does not necessarily resemble Maura, but the close familial relationship between Rose and Gittel (Season 2, episode 1) doubles the close relationship between Maura and Ali.

who had introduced Maura to transvestite culture as Marcy, returns as Magnus Hirschfield, the historical sexologist whose trans-affirming research was destroyed by the Nazis. Hirschfield is mentor and protector to Gittel, who is clearly positioned as a transfeminine ancestor for Maura. Finally, one more actor returns in Season 2 from the set of actors we met in “Best New Girl”: Mel Shimkovitz, who goes from playing Jules in “Best New Girl” to playing Jude, a transmasculine person who is part of Gittel’s community at Hirschfield’s Institute for Sex Research. In these two flashback plot lines, the only central characters who aren't double cast are Maura and Gittel, played by Jeffrey Tambour and Hari Nef, respectively. Yet they nonetheless double each other metaphorically, if not literally.





Emily Robinson as Young Ali and Rose.

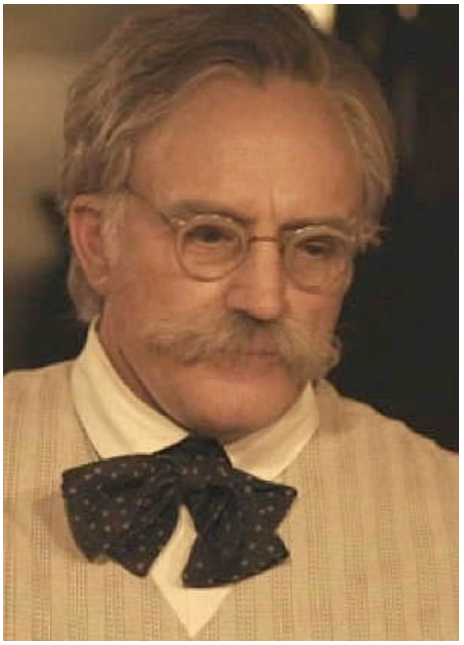




Michaela Watkins as Connie and Yetta.



Bradley Whitford as Marcy and Magnus Hirschfield.



An understandable family resemblance between Rose and her granddaughter Ali is clearly apparent through the double casting of Robinson as both characters. Watkins is also recognizable as both Connie and Yetta, although the logic of double casting Maura's Season 1 love interest as her Season 2 grandmother is more complicated. Whitford, on the other hand, is barely recognizable across his two roles as Marcy and Magnus Hirschfield, and X-Ray helps to elucidate this instance of double casting.

Double casting is not the only way that *Transparent* represents intergenerational doubling and transfeminine history, for the show also creates moments when characters from two different time periods coexist within the same frame. This happens briefly in "Best New Girl," when a pan moves from young Ali to Ali as an adult, as the adult Ali reminisces about the adventure that took the place of her canceled bat mitzvah. In Season 2, as these moments become more frequent, Ali is often the link between the present and the past. For example, the first episode of Season 2 ends with a shot that shows Ali on a hotel balcony, with Gittel appearing, anachronistically and unbeknownst to Ali, in the background. The sense that the family history haunts Ali is deeply tied to Jewish history more broadly, and in addition to epigenetic trauma, Ali researches the anti-Semitic and misogynistic "Jew shoes" that some Jewish women were forced to wear, shoes adorned with bells that warned gentiles of a Jewish woman's approach. As Ali's interest in Jewish history increases, and the boundaries between past and present become more permeable, Ali eventually finds herself wearing the shoes in episode 9 of Season 2.



In this tableau, hairstyle and the directionality of their poses emphasize the resemblance between Ali and Gittel (Season 2, episode 1).



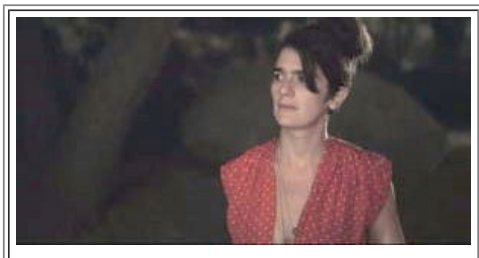


Although Shimkovitz is recognizable in both roles, X-Ray can again be helpful in identifying the double casting, given that Jude tends to appear in the midst of crowd scenes.

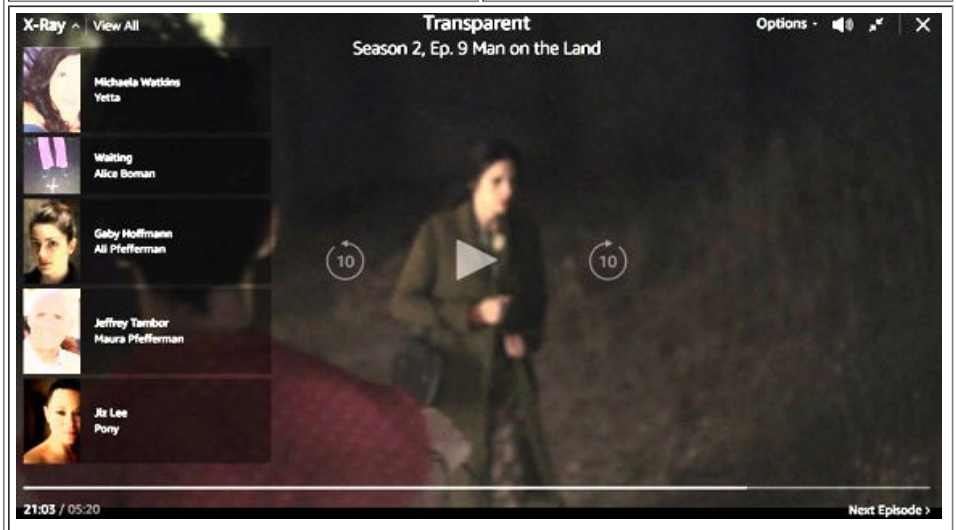


The “Jew shoes” that deliver an audible warning of the approach of an undesirable person become manifest in Season 2, episode 9, an episode whose title refers to the women’s music festival convention of calling out “man on the land” when a man is present. Maura is terrified by the chant “man on the land,” and these two different audible warnings provide an additional link between the marked nature of trans identity and the marked nature of Jewish identity.

In this episode, the bond between Ali and the family's past builds to a climax, intercutting between a present-day women's music festival and Nazis burning Magnus Hirschfield's library in the 1930s. The key sequence begins with Ali walking in the woods, and as she walks, she passes an old woman who looks at her askance. Ali doesn’t realize what the audience immediately recognizes: this woman is Yetta, Ali's great-grandmother. As Ali continues walking, she sees a bonfire in the distance. This is hardly an unexpected sight, given that she is in the woods near the music festival campground. However, as she gets closer, she finds Nazis burning the records from Hirschfield's Institute, while Rose and Gittel look on. Ali and Rose catch sight of each other across the bonfire, and then approach each other, just in time to watch, together, as Gittel is dragged away by the Nazis. Just as the records from Hirschfield's Institute were destroyed, setting back global knowledge of transgender history and medical research, Gittel also disappears from her family's history. It is unclear that any of the contemporary generations, including Ali, consciously understand this part of their family history. For Drucker, who owns an extensive collection of trans autobiographies, discovering, telling, and preserving trans history is not only an artistic opportunity but a political responsibility.[22] And yet simultaneously, the disappearance of trans history cannot be untangled from the particular dangers that visibility poses to trans people.

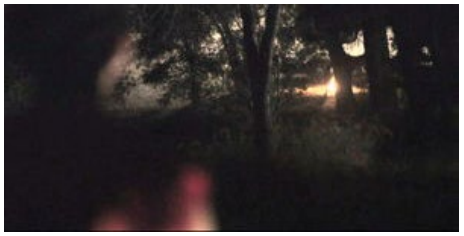






For any viewer who has difficulty recognizing Yetta amid the darkness of the scene, X-Ray offers immediate clarification, albeit while blurring Yetta’s face through the overlay

(Season 2, episode 9).





Across one intercut close-up of Ali, the bonfire from the music festival campground transforms into a book burning bonfire (Season 2, episode 9).









This scene bridges time and space through the simple technique of cutting along eyelines to establish relationships between characters who are otherwise irrevocably separate. While Rose and Ali are able to touch – with Ali (Hoffman) simultaneously connecting to both her grandmother and her younger self (Robinson) – Gittel remains in a separate frame, linked to the other two by eyeline matches only.

The epistemology of visibility and Amazon.com's X-Ray





Through analyzing Drucker's independent work and some aspects of *Transparent* with which she has been closely involved, I have suggested that Drucker's contribution to *Transparent* may include far more than representational accuracy. As Drucker herself notes, artists draw subconsciously on other works, and although Drucker herself didn't make the decision to double cast the roles played by Robinson, Watkins, Whitford, and Shimkovitz, her work is well-known among *Transparent*'s creative team.[23] However, just as Ali struggles to locate the precise pathways epigenetic trauma takes through her family tree, it seems impossible for me to prove definitively that the doubling in Drucker's independent work influenced Soloway's decision to double cast these eight characters.

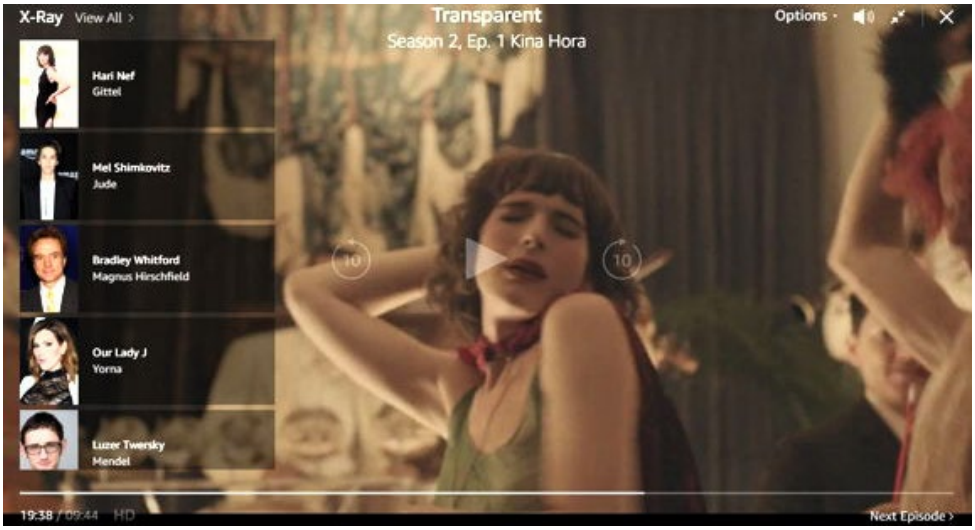
As I grappled with the implications of producing an argument that was speculative rather than definitive,[24] I had to confront the role that visibility—evidentiary visibility—plays in my own scholarly practice. Particularly in the history of trans representation and media production, evidentiary lacunas are arguably more common than definitive proof. Furthermore, media representations of trans people display a disturbing interest in evidentiary visibility, particularly through the trope of the reveal.

In the trope of the reveal, "the truth" of a trans person's identity is exposed,

Robinson in particular appears in a variety of shots in which the context creates visual links between her two double cast characters. For example, in addition to the images above that posed her next to her characters' respective sisters, both her characters lounge on dimpled sofas, with costuming serving as the key visual marker of each moment's historical period (Season 1, episode 8; Season 2, episode 9).

usually by making their genitals or secondary sex characteristics visible.[25] The reveal encourages a kind of spectatorship that is concerned with the relationship between the surface and what lies beneath, a relationship in which transgression appears as any challenge to the assumption that the surface should function as a transparent or self-evident arbiter of truth. Although the trope of the reveal is a trope that is specifically associated with trans representation, the role of the genital reveal in determining identity is also a salient question in relation to Jewish identity, making issues of evidentiary visibility doubly fraught in relation to *Transparent*. According to Halberstam, temporality and visibility become intertwined in the trope of the reveal, since the reveal alters the spectator's relationship to what was previously seen. This produces a particular type of alternative temporality in media, a mode that Halberstam dubs "the rewind," for in this mode the audience "rewinds" the story metaphorically (or literally) to reinterpret it as a new story: a story of passing.[26][27] In *Transparent*, however, the alternative temporality produced by the double casting is multidirectional, in contrast to the linearity implied by "rewind."

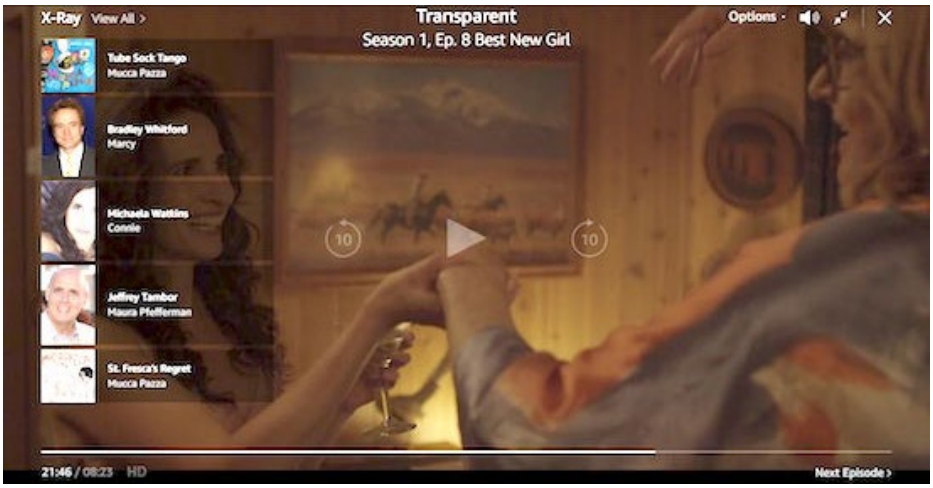
Yet since it is an Amazon production, spectators are still encouraged to look "beneath" the surface of *Transparent* for the truth, using the "X-Ray" feature that Amazon has created in partnership with the Internet Movie Database. In fact, I used the X-Ray feature myself to confirm my suspicion that Emily Robinson was double cast as young Ali and Rose, and it was through the X-Ray feature that I discovered that Michaela Watkins, Bradley Whitford, and Mel Shimkovitz were also double cast. Furthermore, X-Ray can also be used to seek out actors with noticeably Jewish last names, something that has particular relevance in the case of *Transparent*, but that is also attached to a long history of Jewish identities and Jewish names being alternately concealed and revealed in Hollywood.



This screenshot of X-Ray both reveals double cast characters and reveals that Bradley Whitford, the actor playing the very Jewish Magnus Hirschfield, has a very non-Jewish last name.

According to the Internet Movie Database, "X-Ray for Movies and TV" can be accessed "with a simple screen tap" while streaming content from Amazon, and it "will display the cast members in the current scene, the title and performer of the music you're hearing, and trivia such as goofs, location information, and general facts about the video." By clicking on the information thus revealed, the spectator can learn even more about the cast, music, trivia, etc. Strikingly, X-Ray functions much like the trope of the reveal as described by Danielle M. Seid. Seid writes, "in literature and film, the reveal presents previously 'hidden' or unknown information to the audience."[28] Looking yet further beneath the surface, the true nature of the X-Ray feature becomes apparent: through connecting

spectators to additional information about the media they consume, audiences can be directed to opportunities to purchase material associated with this media, such as featured songs.

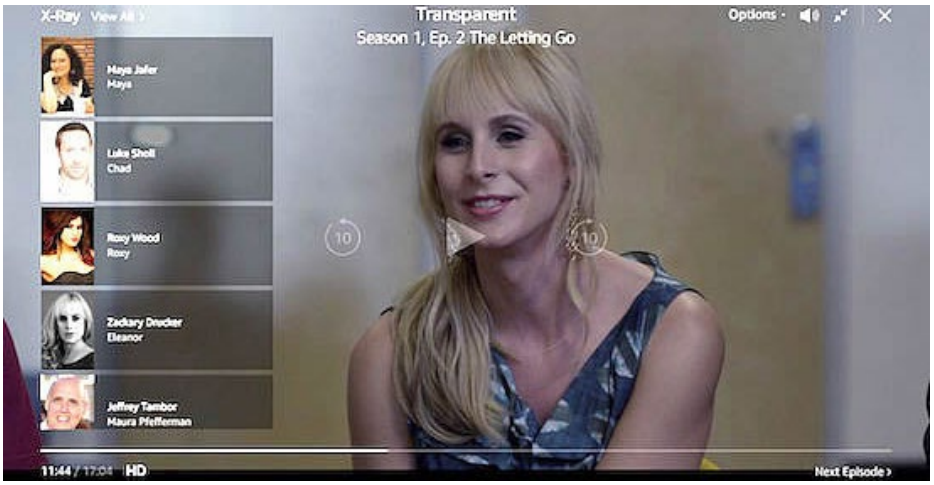


X-Ray not only informs viewers about the music that accompanies their media, for example, highlighting the song that plays as Maura and Connie dance; in addition, it allows viewers to purchase featured music with just a couple of clicks.

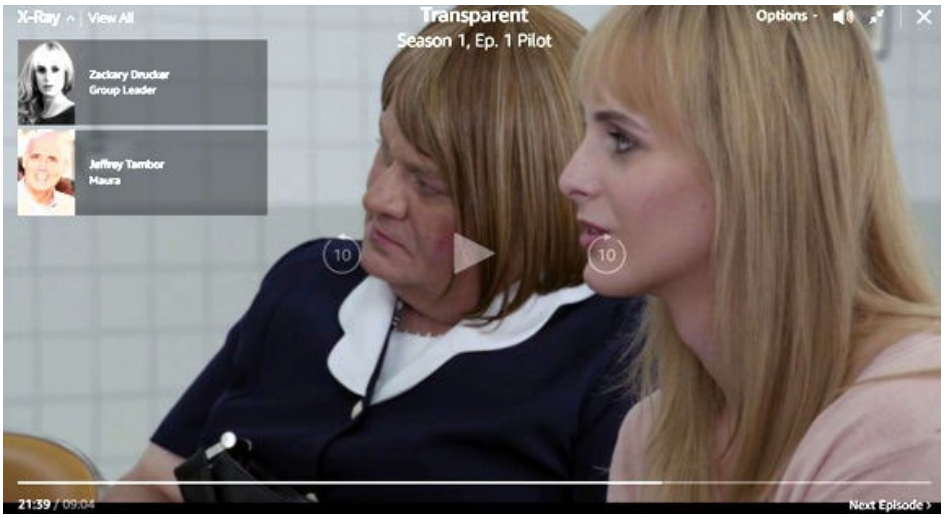
But is the logic of visibilty that is apparent in X-Ray the only mode through which visibility operates, or does the complicated logic of visibility offer other, albeit comprised, possibilities? Although Seid describes the negative, troubling, and problematic aspects of the reveal, she also notes that the reveal can offer an opportunity "to exert agency and reveal oneself, to determine the meaning of one's own life and body."[29] As such, the reveal is arguably central to Transgender Day of Visibility, a holiday created in 2009 by trans activist Rachel Crandall as a positive counterpoint to Transgender Day of Remembrance. In a statement on Transgender Day of Visibility from the set of *Transparent* Season 3, Drucker herself states that, "as a woman named Zackary," she herself has tended to choose visibility. Yet though the X-Ray feature ties visibility to monetization, and although the position of trans consultant also transforms visibility into compensation, non-binary poet Alok Vaid-Menon notes that trans visibility often doesn't result in increased funding for trans "organizations, campaigns, and struggles." Additionally, Vaid-Menon describes visibility as "a form of (nonconsensual) labor that we have to [perform] in order to make our experiences coherent to others." Seid notes that even when trans people choose to be visible, visibility does not necessarily affirm their identities, but rather invites continual contestations.[30] According to Halberstam, visibility opens up possibilities for discipline and control.[31]

Visibility is complicated, but the tools and methods through which visibility is negotiated matter.[32] In her statement on Transgender Day of Visibility, Drucker observes that "what's been integral to our survival is actually invisibility," as historically trans people have tried "to blend in and erase their histories." However, in her independent work and as a producer for *Transparent*, Drucker uncovers and shares these erased and forgotten histories, crafting alternative temporalities within which transfeminine history emerges through intergenerational doubling. The aesthetic strategies she employs are profoundly different from the cataloguing approach of a tool like X-Ray, although cataloguing and archiving plays its own role in preserving trans histories. In seeking to make her creative labor visible, I hope that my own research operates outside of the logic of visibility apparent in the trivia-ization and monetization of a tool like X-Ray—despite the fact that that my work was facilitated by its database.

Ironically, because X-Ray doesn't document producers, Drucker herself only appears in X-Ray during a single scene in which she plays a small role as the leader of a support group. And despite the efforts of Soloway, Drucker, Ernst, and others to include a variety of trans people on and off screen, even some of the trans actors who appear in this scene disappear in X-Ray.



Here, Drucker appears both on-screen and in X-Ray, along with many of the other trans cast members who play characters in Maura's support group (Season 1, episode 1).



At this point, although Drucker appears both on-screen and in x-ray, the other actor who appears on screen is not acknowledged by X-Ray, which only highlights Drucker and Tambor.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

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1. J. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005). [return to essay]

2. *Transparent*. Executive producer Jill Soloway. Associate producers Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst. Amazon streaming video, 2014-2015.

3. For example, see Debra Birnbaum, "'Transparent' Creates Trans-Positive Environment Behind the Scenes," *Variety*, October 1, 2014, http://variety.com/2014/artisans/production/transparent-creates-trans-positive-environment-behind-the-scenes-1201317634/, accessed April 29, 2016; S. Nicole Lane, "Zackary Drucker On Queer TV, Irreverence, And Family," *The Establishment*, December 16, 2015, http://www.theestablishment.co/2015/12/16/transparent-co-producer-zackary-drucker-talks-queer-tv-irreverence-and-family/, accessed April 29, 2016; and "OUT100: Zackary Drucker & Rhys Ernst," *OUT Magazine*, November 6, 2014, http://www.out.com/out-exclusives/out100-2014/2014/11/06/out100-zackary-drucker-rhys-ernst, accessed April 29, 2016.

4. Lisa Cartwright, *Screening the Body: Tracing Medicine's Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

5. As a television show uniquely and intimately concerned with what it means to be Jewish in the United States in the 21st century, the series breaks new ground beyond its representation of Maura and her community.

6. See for example: Daniel Reynolds, "Is 'Transface' a Problem in Hollywood?" *The Advocate*, February 25, 2015, http://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/2015/02/25/transface-problem-hollywood, accessed July 18, 2016; Laura Mandanas, "'Transparent' TV Pilot Features Trans Mom, Queer Women, Additional Delightful Things," *Autostraddle.com*, February 12, 2014, http://www.autostraddle.com/transparent-tv-pilot-features-trans-mom-queer-women-other-delightful-things-223430, accessed July 18, 2016; Nick Duffy, "Transparent star: I understand frustration with male actor playing trans woman," *Pink News*, October 8, 2014, http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/10/08/transparent-star-i-understand-frustration-with-male-actor-playing-trans-woman, accessed July 18, 2016; William Van Meter, "'Maura Is Real to Me': Jeffrey Tambor on His Role in Transparent," *Vulture.com*, September 23, 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2014/09/jeffrey-tambor-on-his-role-in-transparent.html, accessed July 18, 2016.

7. Jenelle Riley, "Amazon, 'Transparent' Make History at Golden Globes," *Variety*,

January 11, 2015, http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/amazon-transparent-make-history-at-golden-globes-1201400485/, accessed July 13, 2016.

8. Olivia Armstrong, "Now You Can Watch 'Transparent' Without Amazon Prime," *Decider*, January 22, 2015, http://decider.com/2015/01/22/transparent-streaming-free-amazon/, accessed July 13, 2016.

9. Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 441-449.

10. Darby English, *How To See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 7.

11. English, *How To See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, 25-26.

12. Anastasia Kyriacou, "Review: 'Transparent' – the True Transgender Tipping Point?" *Pink News*, September 25, 2014, http://www.pinknews.co.uk/2014/09/25/review-transparent-the-true-transgender-tipping-point/, accessed July 11, 2016.

13. Cael Keegan, "Op-ed: How *Transparent* Tried and Failed to Represent Trans Men," *The Advocate*, October 22, 2014, http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2014/10/22/op-ed-how-transparent-tried-and-failed-represent-trans-men, accessed July 11, 2016.

14. Mey Rude, "My Day On The Set Of 'Transparent,' Where Trans Voices Actually Get Heard," *Autostraddle.com*, December 13, 2015, http://www.autostraddle.com/transparent-wants-to-give-trans-people-power-over-their-own-stories-and-in-the-industry-320237/, accessed July 11, 2016.

15. As Dan Udy points out in this issue, there is no unified transgender subject, and therefore it is questionable whether any trans consultant can truly speak to all of trans experience.

16. In addition to media commentary that describes trans consultants working to authenticate media and access economic opportunity, trans consultants themselves describe their labor in these terms. For example, Calpernia Addams sees her work as ensuring accurate and positive trans representation in Hollywood ("Op-ed: In Defense of Jared Leto," *Advocate*, March 5, 2014, http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2014/03/05/op-ed-defense-jared-leto, accessed April 29, 2016) and at a luncheon at the University of Chicago on May 8, 2015, Zackary Drucker described her work on *Transparent* as an economic opportunity.

17. Sabine Meyer, email to the author, April 20, 2016.

18. Although double casting is also an important artistic choice in *American Horror Story* (2011 -), created and produced by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, it is a technique that is rarely employed in US television.

19. Drucker, May 8, 2015; Zackary Drucker, premiere of *Southern for Pussy* at Trans Tech Social in Chicago on October 28, 2016.

20. Zackary Drucker, email to the author, April 27, 2016.

21. Drucker, May 8, 2015.

22. Drucker, October 28, 2016.

23. Drucker, May 6, 2016.

24. Additionally, my decision to continue working on this project even when I realized that I would not be able to produce a watertight argument was partly inspired by the analysis of the gendering of argument in Erica Rand, "Hip Openers: On the Visuals of Gendering Athleticism," *Queer Difficulty in Art and Poetry: Re-thinking the Sexed Body in Verse and Visual Culture*, edited by Jongwoo Jeremy Kim and Christopher Reed (Routledge, 2017) [forthcoming].

25. Danielle M. Seid, "Reveal," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 176.

26. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 78.

27. Of course, passing is also an important issue for Jewish identity, although Eve K. Sedgwick argues that Jewish identity is easier to conceal than queer identities in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1990), 79.

28. Seid, "Reveal," 176.

29. Seid, "Reveal," 176.

30. Seid, "Reveal," 176.

31. Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, 10.

32. As Dan Udy observes in this issue, social media can marshal visibility towards capitalistic personal branding while simultaneously supporting collective political work.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA





I Am Cait logo. *Vanity Fair cover* (June 9th, 2015)

Keeping it real: genre and politics on *I Am Cait*

by Dan Udy

Having first gained fame for winning gold in the 1976 Olympic decathlon, Caitlyn Jenner—formerly known as Bruce—re-entered the media spotlight in the mid-2000s as the stepfather to Kim Kardashian and a peripheral character in the Reality show *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* (E! Entertainment Television, 2007-present). After separating from her wife Kris in 2013 and moving to a secluded multi-million dollar home in Malibu, California, she began the process of gender transition. In April 2015 she gave an extensive coming out interview to Diane Sawyer while still using her old name and male pronouns ("Bruce Jenner: The Interview" 2015), and shortly afterwards Jenner revealed her new name and appearance in a cover story for *Vanity Fair* magazine shot by celebrity photographer Annie Leibovitz (Bissinger 2015). E! Entertainment Television simultaneously announced its upcoming Reality series *I Am Cait* that would follow her new life as a transgender woman in the public eye. Through the course of the series viewers watched Jenner meet others in the trans community, reveal herself to family members for the first time, and commission a redesign of her luxury home to reflect her new "feminine" style.



"Bruce Jenner: The Interview" (ABC)



"Bruce Jenner: The Interview" (ABC)

After being renewed by the network, *I Am Cait* returned to E! for its second season on March 2, 2016 with an episode titled "Politically Incorrect." Although season 1 had addressed political issues at various points, such moments fell under the show's broader focus on Jenner's journey of self-discovery. In contrast, the season 2 premiere framed upcoming episodes through the lens of tense political conflict, and positioned trans politics at the heart of its season-long story arc. At its opening, Jenner appears in a video diary segment made just after filming had wrapped. In it, she reflects on the season's main event—a month-long trip across the United States with a group of trans activists and cultural producers. Here she notes the fierce political debates that arose on the group's tour bus. A handful of clips follow that document the season's key dramatic moments, before cutting back to one month earlier and the start of the bus trip preparations.



Caitlyn Jenner opens the first episode of *I Am Cait* Season 2 ("Politically Incorrect") with a video diary segment looking back on the events that took place.

Since announcing her allegiances to the Republican Party in her Diane Sawyer interview, Jenner has attracted widespread criticism for her comments on passing, same-sex marriage, and welfare. This essay doesn't seek to simply explore her politics, especially considering that she has made her ideological position repeatedly and patently clear. Instead, it takes her contentious views as a starting point for addressing the complex power dynamic among *I Am Cait*'s network of participants and producers. Here I focus on how the docu-soap format was politicized by both groups against the backdrop of the 2016 presidential race, and I argue that the show demonstrates a collective form of queer political performance as a result.

The performance of queer politics in Reality TV is hardly new. In 1994, a young gay, HIV-positive Cuban immigrant named Pedro Zamora appeared on season 3 of *The Real World* (1992-present)—MTV's seminal Reality series in which a group of strangers are filmed as they live and work together. When later writing on the show, José Esteban Muñoz famously theorized Zamora's work as a radical moment of queer counterpublicity.[1] [open notes in new window]



The Real World: San Francisco cast. Back row (L-R): David "Puck" Rainey, Cory Murphy, Mohammed Bilal, Judd Winick. Front row (L-R): Rachel Campos, Pam Ling, Pedro Zamora





In Episode 19 of *The Real World: San Francisco*, "Love Rules", Pedro and Sean undergo a commitment ceremony in the *Real World* apartment (Air date: November 3, 1994). In *Counterpublicity: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz describes Zamora's televisual activism as performing a Focauldian "ethics of the self", and draws particular attention to the commitment ceremony as 'a moment of counterpublic theater' that is 'like none that has ever been viewed on commercial television (Muñoz 1999, 158)



Two decades later, Laverne Cox followed suit when navigating the demands of producers on season 1 of *I Want to Work for Diddy* (Vh1, 2006), an *Apprentice*-inspired competition to find rap mogul P. Diddy's next personal assistant.[2] Queer roots even go back to the genesis of Reality TV in the PBS documentary series *An American Family* (1973). As cameras captured a year in the life of the Loud family from Santa Barbara, California, eldest son Lance—a flamboyant, self-deprecating musician who moved to New York to follow his hero, Andy Warhol—quickly became the genre's first breakout star. The particular mode of queer political performance on *I Am Cait*, though, is unique in many respects. It draws upon new technological contexts for docu-soap production, new modes of viewer engagement that these technologies have produced, and increased visibility of trans advocates, activists, and public figures over recent years.

Laverne Cox, *I Want to Work for Diddy,* Season 1 (Vh1)



(L-R) Stefanie Sitzer & Laverne Cox, *I Want to Work for Diddy,* Season 1 (Vh1)



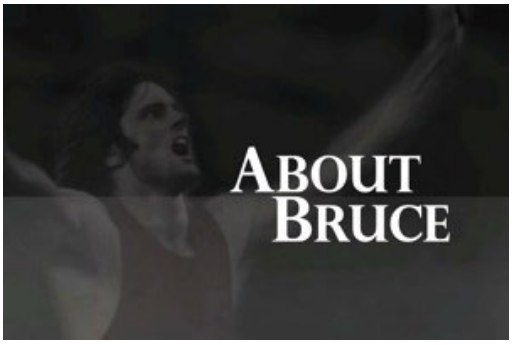
The Loud family. Back row (L-R): Kevin, Grant, Delilah, Lance. Front row (L-R): Michele, Pat, Bill.



Lance Loud is filmed writing a letter in his room at the Chelsea Hotel, New York City. (PBS)

Representational politics—that is, the notion that political equality can be achieved by increasing the number of queer subjects represented in film and television—is by now a clumsy lens through which to approach media texts, and it is not the approach I use here. Nor, I believe, is it the approach taken by the cast members of *I Am Cait*. Rather, the group use their visibility as trans subjects on a mainstream TV production as a springboard for more direct forms of media activism. In short, the trans cast members of *I Am Cait* make activist interventions that extend the work of merely being seen: they talk to and about each other, reflect on the content of the program itself, and point outwards to social justice movements beyond the confines of the show. That this takes place during an election season throws the political nature of their performance into especially sharp relief.

Watching the docu-soap: audience interactions online



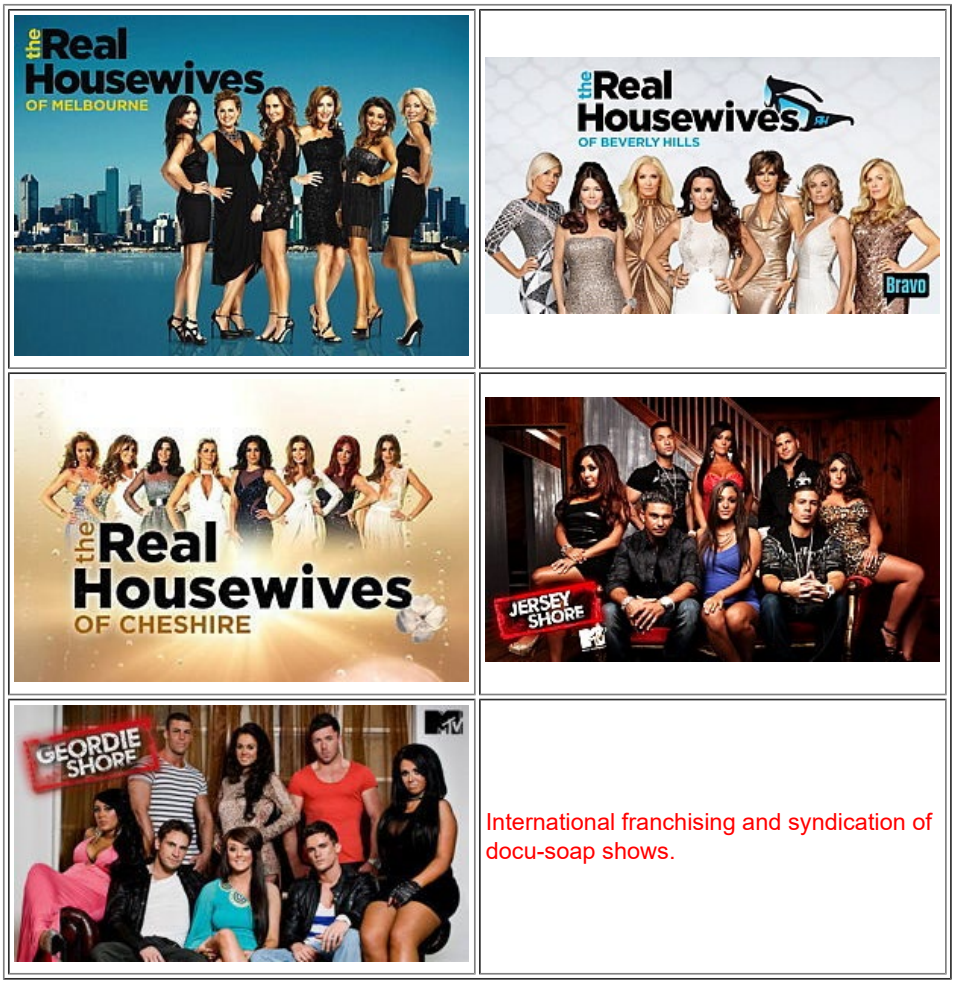
When announced in June 2015, *I Am Cait* was billed by E! as an eight-part "docu-series" that would tell Caitlyn Jenner's 'intimate story' and 'join "Cait" as she seeks out her "new normal"' ("Watch the First Promo for Caitlyn Jenner's New Docu-Series on E!" 2015). The marketing of the show as a "docu-series" signalled an attempt by producers to differentiate the programme from the numerous Reality TV productions also broadcast on E!, such as *Keeping Up With The Kardashians*. As a regular cast-member on the latter before her divorce from her wife Kris, Jenner often featured in scenes with her family members—most notably in a two-part episode devoted to her coming out, "About Bruce" (2015)—and she continues to make occasional appearances on the show. This decision by producers to distance *I Am Cait* from other shows on the network, though, is a significant one, and reflects a broader shift among producers of docu-soap programming away from the umbrella term of "Reality TV."

To speak of Reality TV as a coherent genre is challenging, if not impossible. As Annette Hill writes, it is 'a moving target' that 'resists a single identity, occupying multiple positions for different groups of people, in various regions and cultures' (Hill 2014, 9). Its only requirement is that its participants appear as themselves in unscripted—but not necessarily unplanned—situations. The sub-genre of the docu-soap, though, has its own distinct trajectory, and shows such as *Keeping Up*



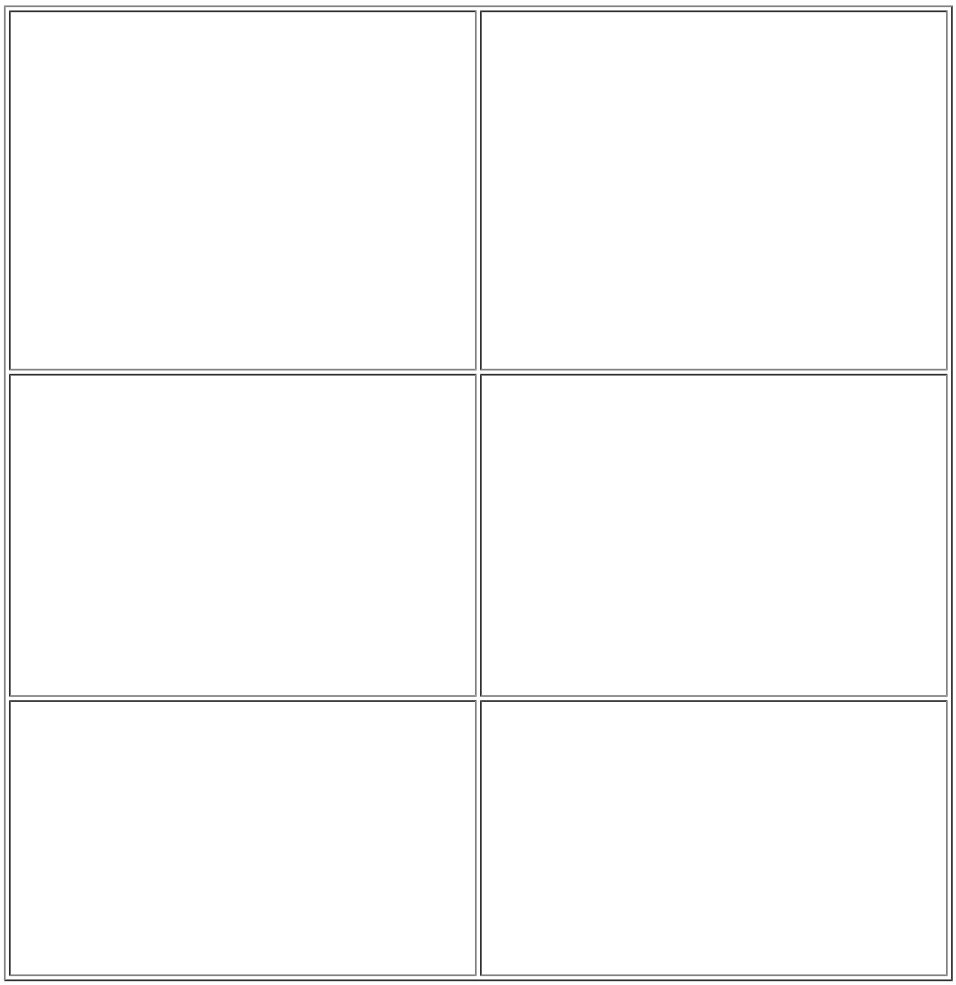
Keeping Up With the Kardashians: About Bruce (E! Entertainment Television, May 17th & 18th 2015)

With the Kardashians, *Jersey Shore* and *The Real Housewives* have now proliferated through international syndication and franchising to dominate broadcast schedules across the globe. In this essay I focus specifically on the docu-soap, due to its adoption of elements from the earlier documentary genre of Cinéma Vérité. Its relationship to this precursor is a fragile one and results in unique modes of audience behavior. That is, docu-soap viewers are now actively involved in teasing out the separate elements of "documentary" and "soap" in the shows they watch, and the rise of Web 2.0 platforms has enabled this work to take place. As a consequence, these new viewing practices now feed back to shape the production and marketing of docu-soap shows, and are particularly evident in the case of *I Am Cait*.



International franchising and syndication of docu-soap shows.

Since the docu-soap exploded into public consciousness with *The Real World*, it has provoked unease among viewers through its indeterminate place between documentary "fact" and entertainment "fiction."[4] Although its participants are undoubtedly real, their interactions and behaviors may be influenced by footage edits, producer demands, or a combination of the two. Annette Hill has returned to this formal ambiguity and its effects on viewers throughout her work on Reality TV, and she grounds her observations in a wealth of participant-based research. In *Restyling Factual TV: Audiences and News, Documentary and Reality Genres* she describes how 'viewers do not experience factual genres in isolation but as part of a chaotic mix of factuality' (Hill 2007, 2), and she later notes that 'a queasy feeling' is now 'a feature of audience engagement with the genre' (Hill 2014, 58).



[5]



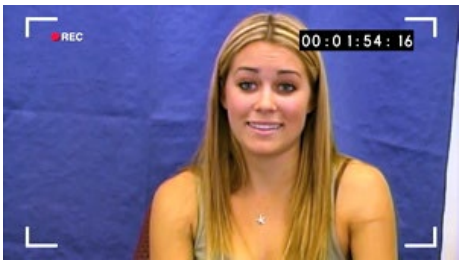


In the mid-2000s, MTV's "real-life" dramas *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* (2004-2006) and its spin-off *The Hills* (2005-2009) compounded the formal ambiguity of the docu-soap. Both shows focused on a cast of real affluent teenagers and young adults in southern California, yet indicated a meticulous production process through multiple camera angles, a range of shot types, and flattering lighting. Unlike the Vérité-influenced style of *The Real World*, producers of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* instead appeared to take their cues from Hollywood; that the cast were often evasive when questioned about production methods only added to the shows' mystique. It was not until the end of the final episode—in which a pan out reveals stars Kristen Cavallari and Brody Jenner to be standing on a movie set—that the artifice of both programs is acknowledged, and only recently have cast members revealed how events were staged for the camera.[6] The appeal of *Laguna Beach* and *The Hills* for MTV's young target audience rested on their particular mix of generic forms, and built upon the success of the teen drama series *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003-2007). Not only did they promise an insight into the community that inspired Fox's hit series, but they also adopted the latter's episodic plot structure and co-opted its locations and production techniques. As such, producers capitalized upon audience investment in an already popular fictional program, and amplified this effect by claiming, at least implicitly, that the drama among cast members was all "real."



The Hills finale: after Kristen Cavallari bids goodbye to her on-again, off-again boyfriend Brody Jenner and drives away in a limousine, the backdrop of the Hollywood hills is pulled back to reveal a movie set. A pan out shows Cavallari's limousine metres away, and she emerges to be reunited with Jenner after production has ostensibly wrapped.









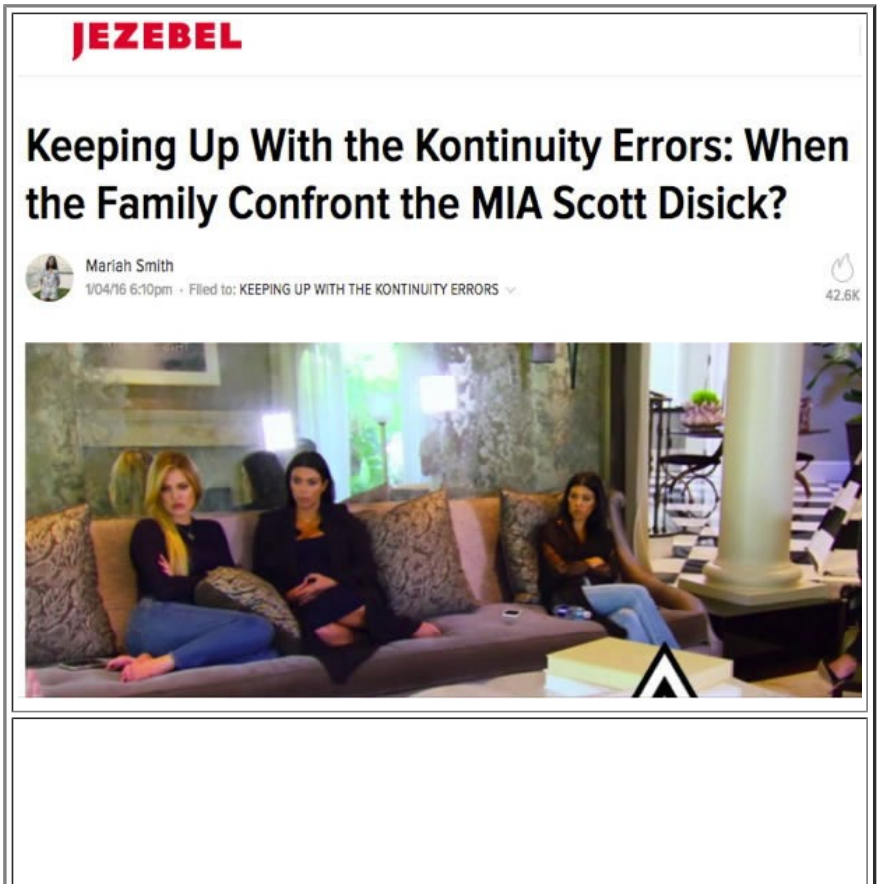
The Hills: That Was Then, This Is Now (MTV, August 2nd 2016): to mark the 10th anniversary of the show's premiere, former star Lauren Conrad was filmed in conversation with members of the production team discussing how plotlines were developed and events were edited and/or staged. In the one-hour special viewers were also shown behind-the-scenes footage and Conrad's original *Laguna Beach* audition.

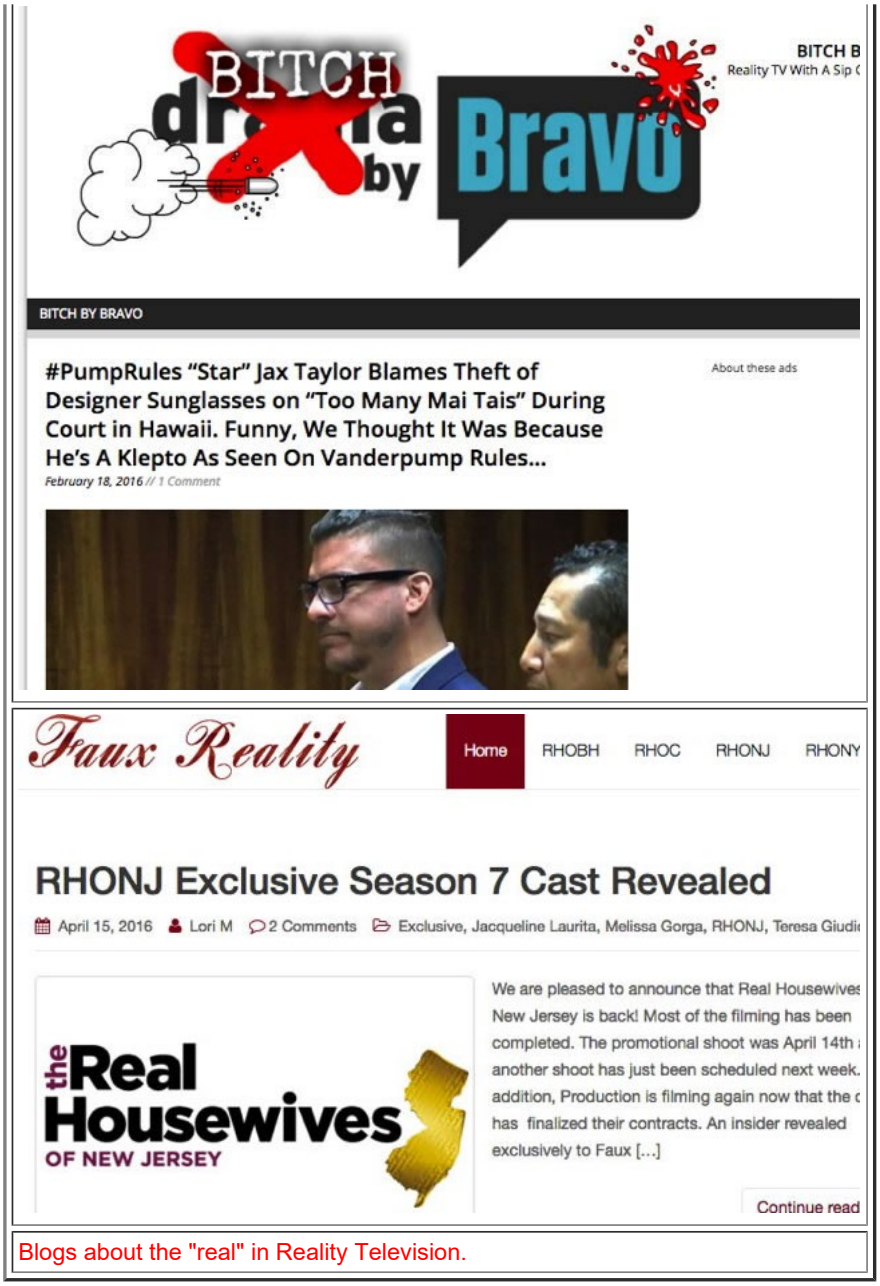
The explosion of social media platforms and user-generated web content at the same time as MTV's new wave of Reality programming, I argue, enabled web users to decipher the new types of media on their screens. In turn, the discursive possibilities of Web 2.0 paved the way for a new relation between audiences and producers. As viewers encountered unsettling hybrids of real life and fiction, they began to unpick the truth claims of such shows. A decade later, cynicism now drives the reception of docu-soap programming by web-savvy viewers. Gossip blogs and social media networks provide platforms for them to investigate the purported "realness" of Reality television and distinguish genuine events from those instigated by production for entertainment value.

For example, journalist Mariah Smith's column "Keeping Up With the Kontinuity Errors" for the former Gawker Media blog *Jezebel* uses social media posts and paparazzi photographs to painstakingly decipher the actual filming dates for scenes in *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*. Unsurprisingly, it transpires that the supposed chronology of events in the show often fails to correspond to the order in which they were actually filmed, and cast members often feign feelings of anticipation for what has already taken place. "Keeping Up With The Kontinuity Errors" is one of many blogs that work to such effect [see images below]:

- "Reality Steve" provides spoilers for *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*,
- "Faux Reality Entertainment" exposes the inner workings of *The Real Housewives* franchise, and
- "Bitch by Bravo" reveals behind-the-scenes events across multiple *Bravo* docu-soaps.

Alongside this user-generated content, web-based gossip outlets such as *TMZ* and *Radar Online* also provide scoops on Reality stars and the shows in which they feature. Crucially, social media invariably function as the "evidence" that guides these investigations, and as such, they provide both a means of accessing the documentary "real" and also a platform for disseminating uncovered truths.





Blogs about the "real" in Reality Television.

From “docu-soap” to “docu-series”

A noticeable shift in docu-soap production methods took place through the early 2010s in response to this widespread cynicism among Reality TV audiences. Producers began to slowly undo the meticulously constructed “Reality” of docu-soap shows by incorporating behind-the-scenes footage that reveals elements of the production process. This trend can best be understood as a return to the principles of Cinéma Vérité (i.e. ‘an attempt to strip away the accumulated conventions of traditional cinema in the hope of rediscovering a reality that eludes other forms of filmmaking’, as theorized by Stephen Mamber (Mamber 1974, 4)). Bill Nichols’ division of documentary into six modes—poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive, and performative—is useful for framing this phenomenon, as older and newer docu-soap styles can be positioned across different categories. While earlier docu-soaps mixed observational and participatory modes through fly-on-the-wall footage and interview segments, recent production styles have moved towards the reflexive mode that ‘calls attention to the assumptions and conventions [of] documentary filmmaking’ (Nichols 2010, 31). In line with these changes, the presentation of shows as “docu-



The opening credits to each episode of *I Am Jazz*, a docu-soap following trans teenager Jazz Jennings, includes Jennings being prepared for

an interview with the show's producers.

series" marks attempts to re-orient the docu-soap away from Reality television and its implications of trash, exploitation, and entertainment. The guiding definition of "docu-soap," however, is a serial narrative structure, and as such the moniker of "docu-series" reflects little or no change in production beyond an increased degree of self-reflexivity.



Untucked, a YouTube companion series to Logo's *Rupaul's Drag Race*, documents contestants backstage in between taped segments of the main show and features regular interactions with the production crew.





During Episode 6 of *I Am Cait* Season 2 ("Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?"), Jenny Boylan visits Jenner in her hotel room and notices the camera used for her video diary segments. Boylan then proceeds to use the equipment, and footage from the confessional camera is interspersed with footage documenting the pair filming themselves.

Any changes in production style that do take place are relatively minute, and include a subdued soundtrack, soft lighting and multiple camera angles—often in close-up—for talking head interviews. Prior to *I Am Cait*, *Lindsay*—an eight-part series broadcast on the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) in 2014—demonstrated an early use of these production effects. The show chronicled Lindsay Lohan's re-adjustment to life after a court-mandated rehabilitation program and followed the hard-worn tropes of docu-soap programming, yet it also featured clashes between Lohan and filmmakers as she proved increasingly difficult to work with. *Lindsay* was marketed by OWN as a "docu-series," no doubt to position it more effectively within the Winfrey's personal brand of authenticity, sincerity, and self-improvement; in this respect it revealed OWN's ideological attachment to "documentary" as a means of validating "serious" content.[7]



Keeping Up With the Kardashians: In standard docu-soaps, talking head interviews are filmed in a single head-and-torso shot with the subject either talking directly to the camera or to an

interviewer just behind.



Lindsay and *I Am Cait*: In “docu-series” programmes talking head interviews are filmed using multiple camera angles and varying degrees of close-up.

In the case of *I Am Cait*, early episodes indicated producers’ more explicitly political alignment to “documentary.” Although Jenner—a co-producer on the series—has since scaled back her ambitious rhetoric, she reiterated throughout the first season that her wish was to educate viewers and ‘raise awareness,’ thus bringing about social change. The fraught relationship between *I Am Cait* and its sister program, though, makes the fragility of this rebrand especially acute. For example, in a post from 16th February 2016, Mariah Smith (*KUWTKE*) deduced that a scene from *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* was in fact originally shot for *I Am Cait* (Smith 2016). [See image below]

Scene 7: Filmed on October 28, 2015

Caitlyn Jenner gathers for a girls birthday lunch with Kourtney, Kim, Kylie, and Penelope. Because of the unique way this scene is shot, it's clear that this is a lifted scene from *I Am Cait*'s upcoming season. Caitlyn opens gifts from her girls, after Kim announces that Kendall will be walking in the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show the following month in New York. Kim warns Caitlyn that this is the one fashion show she needs to go to, because it's a huge deal. Caitlyn is thrilled for her child and decides to go. This lunch was **filmed on October 28, 2015**.



Although this doesn't negate the political potential of *I Am Cait*, the interchangeability of both shows proves that an apparent shift from "docu-soap" to "docu-series" is at best a producer-led branding exercise. While the label of "docu-series" may provide more direct signposting towards political content, I argue that the docu-soap genre already provides ample scope for political work. As the second season of *I Am Cait* demonstrates, this labor can be performed in simultaneous opposition to and compliance with the show's producers, and provides numerous avenues for queer intervention.





The difference in colour grading and brightness between these two *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* scenes – both filmed outdoors within a few days of each other and in nearby locations – indicates that the former was originally shot for *I Am Cait*.

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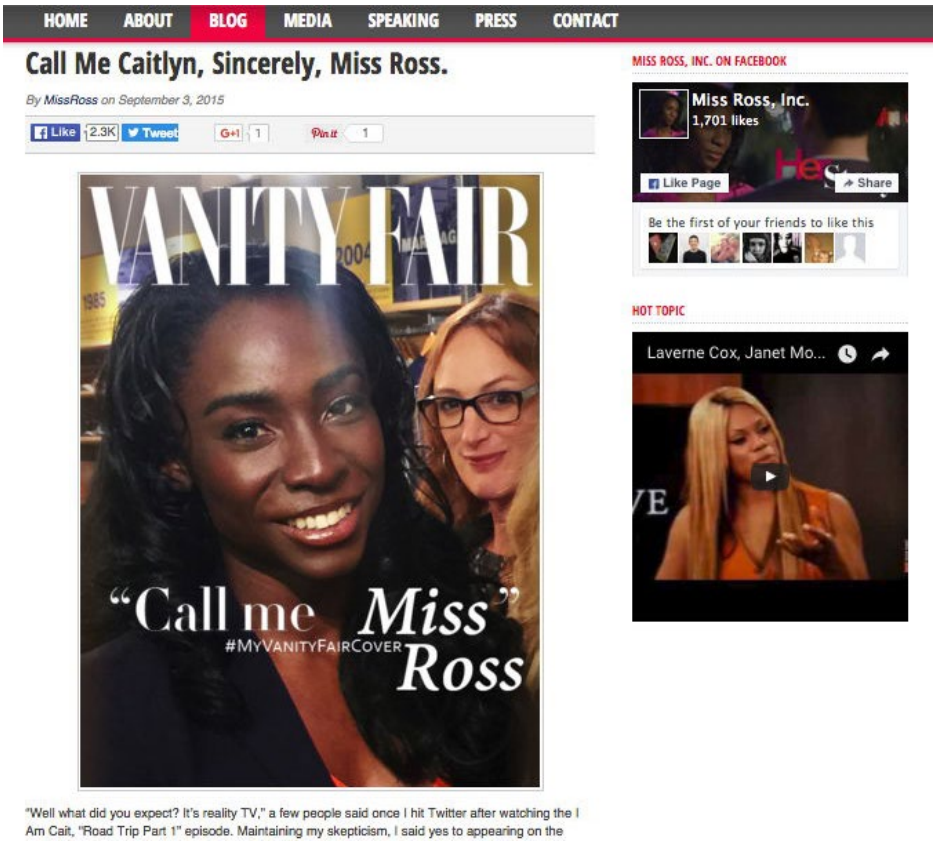
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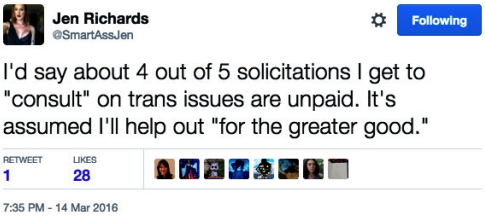
Politics and participation

Between the filming of seasons 1 and 2, the political stakes for *I Am Cait* significantly rose. The backlash against Jenner's wealth, privilege, and political views arose from many quarters, but particularly from among trans advocates and activists. This also included cast members from the show. For example, a withering blog post from entrepreneur and activist Angelica Ross detailed how her brief appearance had been misleadingly edited to silence her, diminish her accomplishments, and contribute to the show's "white savior" narrative. [See image below.]



Specifically, Ross recalled Jenner's initial assurance that *I Am Cait* 'would be different, not just your ordinary reality show, but a docu-series,' and accuses Jenner of 'a gross misuse of power and privilege as an Executive Producer of her own show.' In light of this, fellow activist, filmmaker and Ross's close friend Jen Richards did not return to participate in season 2.

For cast members that continued between seasons, their participation did not signal begrudging acceptance of Jenner's right-wing politics. In fact, many of them were vocal about their disbelief at her views, and the writer and academic Jenny Boylan even disclosed how she tried to leave on the second day of filming. [8] [open notes in new window] But instead of quitting, Boylan and performer Candis Cayne, artist Zachary Drucker, activist Chandi Moore, writer Kate Bornstein and new cast-member Ella Giselle maneuvered nuanced discussions of trans politics and subjectivity into the heart of the show. Against a backdrop of the



Season 1 cast member Jen Richards Tweets about her experience of trans consultancy.

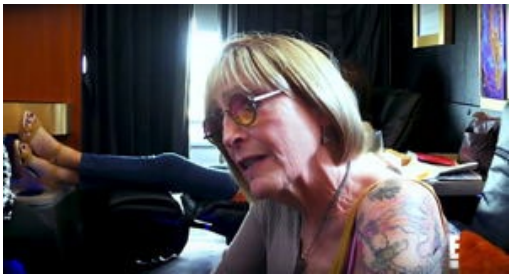


2016 election, the group countered Jenner's dogged fiscal conservatism with a passionate argument for the value of identity politics, and they used the impact of legislation on transgender lives in order to make their case.[9] This complicates the power dynamic of *I Am Cait* between producer/star and supporting cast; that Boylan served as a consultant for the show troubles this even further. Her role, however, does not appear in the opening credits, and is only mentioned in a post on her personal website (Boylan 2015). As Nicole Morse argues in their article, identifying the precise nature of the labor performed by trans consultants is a difficult task, and Boylan only revealed the details of her consulting work in an email interview for this article. Having been shown the story arc of each season at its start and then a rough cut of individual episodes, she was able to make final edits before the show aired. She indicates that in the first season she 'edited quite strongly' as 'it was important to me that we get all the language right.' In the second season, though, 'there was less of this—I was less concerned with walking on eggshells then, and thought it better that we get messy' (Boylan 2016c).

Although Boylan's editorial decisions controlled whether moments of conflict in *I Am Cait* made it to air, determining whether these discussions themselves were pre-meditated is ultimately a speculative process. Approaching the show through the discursive framework of social media, though, helps to illuminate the motivations behind the cast's performances, and the political intent of the work they undertake. And as Web 2.0 fostered audience behaviors that ultimately shaped the production of *I Am Cait*, so too does it provide a lens for unpacking the work of its participants. Figuring such work as performative also draws the group into questions of what "trans media" might mean. For instance, if their intervention is a mode of performance, then what does it say about trans cultural production more broadly?

As Joshua Gamson notes in *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity*, sexual and gender minorities regularly appeared on TV screens throughout the 1980s and 90s, but had 'no choice [...] between manipulative spectacle and democratic forum' (Gamson 1998, 19). Since the emergence of Web 2.0, though, trans subjects have gained agency as both political actors and cultural producers in the field of mainstream media. But if these new technologies have enabled a new form of queer performance, though, and this performance is indeed political, then what exactly are its politics? By looking beyond the cast of *I Am Cait*'s arguments about Presidential candidates and into their discussions of identity, race, and relationships we can find subtler forms of activism that challenge viewers to re-assess how they they relate to those around them. Although partisan politics guides the show's narrative, it functions as a framing device for this more ambitious project. Here, trans-affirming pedagogy comes with a reconceiving of "community" and "difference" aimed squarely at a mainstream cisgender, heterosexual (cis-het) audience. Although I argue that *I Am Cait* is borne from cynical viewing cultures, its appeal to *sincerity* in fact marks a unique turn among docu-soaps that is central to its participants' community-building efforts. By producing a Vérité-inspired "real" within the framework of Web 2.0, the show encourages its audience to respond directly to the cast's public pedagogy online. In turn, the "authenticity" of these social media interactions—un-influenced by TV edits and delivered in real time—builds virtual community between cast members and viewers that subsequently affirms the sincerity of the show itself.

In Episode 2 of Season 2, a debate between Bornstein and Boylan exemplifies the cast's efforts to shift *I Am Cait's* focus away from its central star. While the group are riding from Los Angeles to Santa Fe, Jenner's hair stylist asks Bornstein if the word "tranny" is used among trans women, or if it always offensive. When broadcast, the word was not bleeped, and cast members proceeded to discuss the complex relationship between pejorative slurs and marginalized social groups.



Kate Bornstein and Jenny Boylan debate the use of the word “tranny” (*I Am Cait* Season 2, Episode 2, “Woman of the Year?”)

Bornstein responds by explaining how the word was first used by the trans community in the 1970s, that she herself identifies as a “tranny,” and that those who find the term offensive are ‘very invested in being women, not trans folk.’ At this point Boylan interjects to point out that she is one of those trans women, and that she finds the word triggering since she previously experienced physical transphobic assaults. Bornstein tells Boylan that she’s not going to stop using the word, and asks Boylan to hear the ‘love and respect’ in her voice when she uses it; Boylan responds by telling Bornstein that Bornstein is ‘asking a lot,’ as it’s ‘not an easy thing for [her] to do’ (“Woman of the Year?” 2016).

Throughout this scene, Jenner sits in the background and only gives a brief comment at the end. And although her distance from the action is self-evident, Bornstein and Boylan’s re-iterated their attempts to move the narrative of *I Am Cait* beyond the show’s namesake when the clip was shared through social media networks. After the footage was uploaded to YouTube, Boylan tweeted a link to her followers and explained how the scene was: ‘An urgent conversation about trans discourse. And an example of how the CJ show IS ABOUT MORE THAN HER’ (Boylan 2016a). As the season progressed, Boylan provided regular commentary and interacted with fans through Twitter. She explained that she disliked the filming process but was happy with the final result, and pointed viewers towards upcoming topics the group would address (such as trans women’s opinions of drag, employment discrimination, and the experience of trans women of color). Most significantly, she and Bornstein have used Twitter and media interviews to make their political intent for the show resolutely clear: Boylan repeatedly states that *I Am Cait* is ‘the most progressive, subversive, radical show on TV’ (Glock 2016), and Bornstein posted that she was ‘so proud to be part of #IAmCait: #realityTV in service to #activism, with lotsa heart and slapstick’ (Bornstein 2016). [See tweets below.]





The pair's social media posts indicate how Web 2.0 expands the discursive possibilities of docu-soap production. The show's participants can now parlay brief performances on screen into more nuanced discussions online, and thus extend the life of a few short minutes of footage. While this often related specifically to events in the show, the cast of *I Am Cait* also used their new profile to engage in public discussions on trans-specific topics: on April 18th 2016, for example, the group held a Twitter conversation on HIV testing and treatment using the hashtag #TransHIVchat. The collectivity of this work echoed their performances during the show itself, in which visible moments of community and sisterhood were evident throughout. In particular, an encounter between the cast and Jenner during episode 2 revealed their collective resistance to the show's star while also demonstrating the value of difference and diversity among their own small group. [See tweets below.]



Shortly after Bornstein and Boylan's "t-word" debate, the whole cast confronted Jenner in a Santa Fe hotel about a particularly heated argument on the tour bus. They told her that they were threatened and intimidated by her aggressive behavior and felt unable to engage in conversation for fear of her response. During the ensuing exchange some cast members also revealed their behind-the-scenes discussions over whether to participate. Boylan and Bornstein had spoken with each other before agreeing to sign on for the season, and they now said that they had expressed reservations about appearing together, given their differing political views and the possibility of conflict that might arise. The two explained

how they had ultimately agreed to participate in filming, though, and decided that *I Am Cait*'s overall positive effects would outweigh any such risks.



The cast confront Caitlyn about her aggressive behavior: Season 2, Episode 2.

Their explanation of this process clearly models the form of inter-personal communication they later claimed as their objective for the show. As with their "t-word" debate, the pair showed how diverse viewpoints are shared even among broad political allies, and that community entails listening and accepting such difference. Indeed, in an ESPN interview they even assert that *I Am Cait*'s trans content is incidental to their broader political goals. Bornstein explains how:

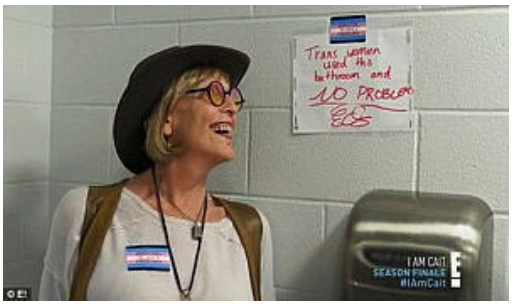
> 'That we are all trans makes the [political] debate easier for people to watch. It's like, look! Trans, trans, trans! And the deeper stuff is taking place simultaneously."

Boylan goes further, contextualizing their work against the backdrop of the 2016 election:

> "In my opinion, the show is not about Caitlyn Jenner and it's not about trans people. The show is really about: How do we talk to each other? The country is now full of people who disagree. And no matter who wins the White House in November we are still going to have a country where about half the people don't talk to the other half. How do we have a conversation with people with whom we disagree, with respect and love?" (qtd in Glock 2016)

Although Boylan may claim that *I Am Cait* is 'not about trans people', I believe that the show contains a dual function. Its cast members performatively demonstrate ways of understanding and accommodating difference, yet this broad goal of transforming community is inextricable from the trans-affirming pedagogy that it provides. While the show's majority cis-het viewers are taught how to communicate with love and respect to those that may be different, that very "other"—the trans subject—is visible, present, and speaking on their screen. Not only this, but the show's participants stage debates and actions that loudly proclaim the validity of trans experience, culminating with repeated acts of civil disobedience in the season 2 finale, "Houston, We Have a Problem."

Following the repeal of the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) by public vote in November 2015—after transphobic campaigns that argued the non-discrimination by-law would allow male paedophiles into women's bathrooms—Jenner arranged for her cast to travel to Texas to speak with Mara Keisling, executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, and pastors who had backed the repeal efforts. After being warned by Bornstein that they risked the possibility of arrest, the group drove around the city to use multiple public restrooms and left signposts reading 'trans women used this bathroom with no problems.' Their intervention marked a visible defiance of the Republican-sponsored "bathroom bills" across the United States that have attempted to restrict public restroom access according to gender assigned at birth, yet also pointed to the broader challenges of navigating public space as a gender non-conforming subject. The mediation of group's protest in Web 2.0 contexts also reflects how technology has been used by queer and trans communities to orient themselves through the gender-regulated public sphere (e.g. the open source web application Refuge Restrooms, which combines mapping software with a user-generated database to direct users to the nearest gender-neutral or gender-inclusive restroom in their area).



Kate Bornstein poses next to the group's hand-made sign in a Houston public restroom (*I Am*

I Am Cait's trans participants, then, are visible, vocal, and political actors, yet they also speak and perform to complicate the notion of what or who a trans subject is. Throughout their many group discussions, cast members publicly challenge normative assumptions about trans subjectivity. In particular, they work to

Cait, Season 2, Episode 8, "Houston, We Have a Problem").



Caitlyn holds a "Houston, We Have a Problem" sticker incorporating the transgender pride flag, designed by Monica Helms in 1999.

deconstruct a singular, unifying model of trans womanhood. Not only is Jenner's role as the supposed face and voice of the trans community quickly dismantled, but so too is any notion of a fixed trans experience that binds the rest of the cast. Thus, while Borstein sees "tranny" as a 'family word,' Boylan finds it offensive, and while Cayne and Moore express a love of drag, Boylan finds it problematic. In this way, cis viewers are reminded that trans identity is articulated on each individual's own terms, and that being an ally to the trans community entails stepping back and learning to listen.

As an extension of this work on trans subjectivity, then, the show's cast—the majority of whom are independent cultural producers—also challenge the notion of trans cultural production as a coherent genre or set of cultural practices. *I Am Cait* is a performative media production by and about trans people, but to label it a work of "trans media" perhaps misses the point. Indeed, the show is generative precisely because it unpacks the very notion of singularity or unity on which a coherent genre relies.

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Notes

1. cf. “Pedro Zamora’s *Real World* of Counterpublicity: Performing an Ethics of the Self” (Muñoz 1999). [return to text]

2. In a 2014 interview with Buzzfeed, Cox explains how she refused to fight with a fellow contestant as she ‘didn’t want to give television the satisfaction of seeing two black women going at it’ (Jones 2016). In “A double-take on reality television: Laverne Cox’s political and pedagogical gestural humor”, Nicole Morse further explicates Cox’s intervention on *I Want to Work for Diddy* through the lens of gestural humor (Morse 2016).

3. The premiere of *The Real World* in 1992 marked the first emergence of the docu-soap as it is known today. Although PBS’s *An American Family* had moulded cinema vérité footage into a soap opera-style story arc in 1973, MTV’s incorporation of video diary interviews among fly-on-the-wall footage quickly became the standard for the genre.

5. ‘Gary Carter (2013) calls *Grey Gardens* an early example of reality TV because it gives the viewer a ‘clear sense that they are performing for the camera in a way that makes you feel really queasy.’ This queasy feeling would become a feature of audience engagement with the genre.’ (Hill, 2015, 58)

6. In an interview on Bethenny Frankel’s talk show *bethenny*, Cavallari revealed that her on-screen relationship with Jenner was entirely fabricated, and that a confrontation with his supposed ex-girlfriend was staged (bethenny 2016). Subsequently, the MTV special *The Hills: That Was Then, This is Now* detailed the editing and production process in a series of interviews with star Lauren Conrad and members of the crew (“*The Hills: That Was Then, This is Now*”, 2016).

7. The “About” page from OWN’s YouTube channel reflects the personal brand cultivated by Winfrey through her many years on daytime TV: ‘OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network is the first and only network named for, and inspired by, a single iconic leader. Oprah Winfrey's heart and creative instincts inform the brand—and the magnetism of the channel. […]OWN is a singular destination on cable. Depth with edge. Heart. Star power. Connection. And endless possibilities’ (“OWN” 2016).

8. ‘On the second day of filming, I tried to quit the show. I had a lengthy conversation with the show-runner saying, “I just can’t do this. I want to go home.” There is footage of this somewhere.’ (Boylan 2016b) [return to p. 2]

9. For example, in the season 2 finale Boylan tells Jenner that ‘Republicans—*your* people—they don’t like us’ when discussing the overturned the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO) (“Houston, We Have a Problem” 2016).

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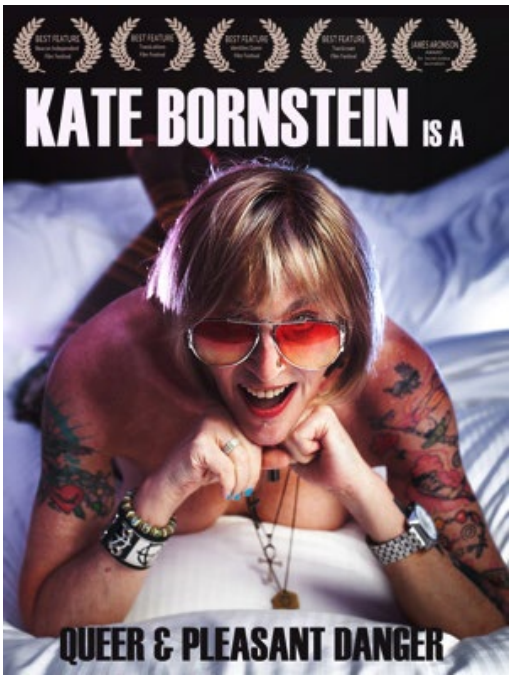
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



Sam Feder's second feature, *Kate Bornstein is a Queer & Pleasant Danger*, 2014, is a portrait of trans icon, Kate Bornstein.

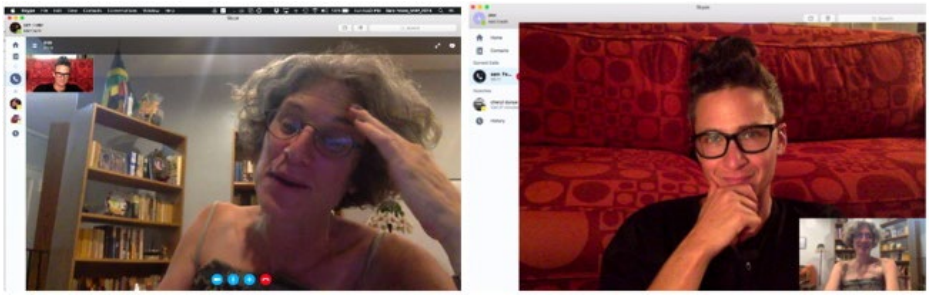
Does visibility equal progress? A conversation on trans activist media

by Sam Feder and Alexandra Juhasz

Summer 2016

The transgender tipping point: who succeeds, who benefits?

Alex: Hi Sam, can you tell me about your background as an artist and your current work on a documentary about trans[1] [open endnotes in new window] media history?



Alex Juhasz, left, and Sam Feder, right.

Sam: Hi, Alex. I started making films in the early 2000s. Since then my work has focused on current activist issues that I'm part of and witnessing, specifically regarding transgender lives. My present film is in response to the growing visibility of trans people in the media and puts that visibility into historical context. How did we get here? How have images of trans people evolved? How does increased visibility intersect with how trans people understand ourselves or how society understands trans lives? Does visibility equal progress?



Trans-indie documentaries, left to right: *Shinjuku Boys* (Kim Longinotto and Jano Williams, 1995), *Southern Comfort* (Kate Davis, 2001), *Transvisible* (Dante Alencastre, 2013), *Major!* (Annalise Ophelian, 2016)

Alex: How is this moment of visibility different from earlier examples of trans visibility?



2005: In the green dress third from the right is Alexandra Billings who played an out trans woman on the TV show version of *Romy & Michelle*.

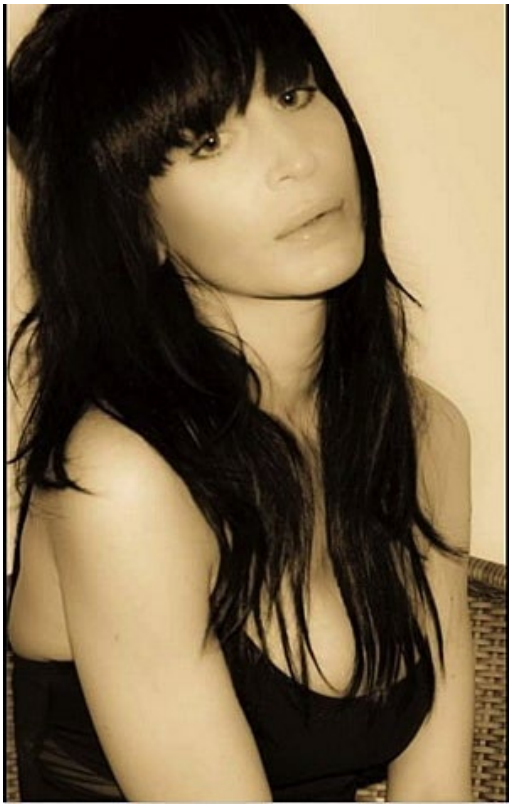
Sam: This moment is different because there are more opportunities, there is a *slight* shift in how dominant films and TV shows write trans characters, and being trans has become a commodity that sells. I struggle with how the current moment casts trans visibility as something new and in that process breaks it from an historical narrative, rendering the past invisible. That's largely why I became interesting in making a film on the history of trans people in media.

Regarding this "moment," just like any good story, there was a *moment* of change in June 2014 when *Time* magazine published the beautiful cover photo of Laverne Cox with the words "Transgender Tipping Point: America's next civil rights frontier." Two years earlier Joe Biden said that transgender discrimination is the civil rights issue of our time. In opposition to the prevalence of historically flat and stereotypical portrayals of trans people, there has been an overt shift in how transgender lives are showing up in the media. A few respectable and somewhat well-rounded trans characters have been written for TV (*The Bold and the Beautiful, Transparent, Orange is the New Black*) with some trans people cast as trans characters (Laverne Cox, Trace Lysette, Alexandra Billings, Ian Harvie, Scott Turner Schofield). With media attention declaring a shift in visibility as a "tipping point," I hear liberal allies noting this as a *success* for trans people in general. However, I don't see success reflected in our lived reality except for the uplift of a few actors. Visibility is not always or necessarily a good thing. It can leave some people more vulnerable to harm, particularly when we consider the intersections of race, class, citizenship, religion, ability, etc. The recent increase in opportunities for visibility is often framed as success, presuming an improvement for all trans lives. This quick move to call this particular visibility "success" performs two erasures: of the ongoing (or increased) struggles in trans people's lives and of the previous visibility of trans people in media.

However, this is not the first time trans people have gained visibility through casting. 2000 was a first in American television history: Jessica Crockett, a



Scott Turner Schofield became the first openly transgender actor to play a major role on daytime television, as the character Nick on *The Bold and the Beautiful,* 2016.



For the first time in American television history (2000), Jessica Crockett, a transgender woman, was cast as a transwoman on *Dark Angel.*

transgender woman, was cast as a transwoman on *Dark Angel* (Sarah Pia Anderson). In 2005, Alexandra Billings played an out trans woman on the TV show version of *Romy & Michelle*. In 2007, Candis Cane was the first transwoman to have a reoccurring role as a transwoman on *Dirty Sexy Money*. But even with this increase in trans casting, the default has always been and continues to be cis people cast in trans roles. [2]

In considering these issues, many questions come to mind. What does success mean in this equation? What does that mean for social justice? What does it mean for trans people who are not invested in Hollywood? What was the role of trans social justice movements in leading up to this "tipping point"? Are we, trans people and trans activists and media makers, accountable for this? Did any of our work lead to this? Are social movements and services concerning trans lives benefiting from this "tipping point" at all? This "tipping point" made room for Caitlyn Jenner to come out. Did any trans people who weren't on her show benefit from that? Jenner is calling herself an activist. *Transparent* is hiring trans actors and crew. Do the opportunities for those few individuals size up to the opportunities the cis people involved will embrace due to the Emmy, Golden Globe, and Peabody awards they've received? Who is actually benefitting from this "tipping point"?

Alex: It is certainly the understanding in contemporary popular culture that there is more visibility or a new visibility, that there are more images to see, and that trans voices are more available within dominant discourse than before. But what the mainstream culture understands is one thing; from where you stand is there a tipping point?

Sam: To what point are we tipping? Visibility of whom to whom? Social justice for whom? Assimilation of whom? A shift in public discourse by whom and about whom? Does visibility actually mean serving as a profitable commodity? Trans people are not yet authorized to set the terms of our own visibility. To be visible, we must conform to the demands placed on us by a public that wants to buy a story that affirms their sense of themselves as ethical. There is a semblance of conversation around what accountability and respect look like in regards to how we talk and write about, frame, and cast trans people. But as we see time and time again, the media experiences historic amnesia: filmmakers and show runners are not showing enough regard for our legacy and history in the media. In their rush to present themselves as doing something new, they remove from view a rich legacy and history of trans people in the media. Some are discovering trans people for the first time, finding our lives interesting for plot development. Others still use being trans as either a distasteful metaphor or a set of tropes we've witnessed since the early days of cinema such as tropes of trauma, pathology, deception, and pathetic-ness. A few seemingly respectful roles pop up and people are overjoyed by that tiny crumb. When you look at those roles they beg questioning: are they actually respectful? Are they doing anything new or different? Or, do they echo ongoing archaic – and harmful – themes and ideas of what it means to be trans?

We have Laverne Cox on *Orange is the New Black*, and she's behind bars. What does that tell us about the life chances of trans women of color? Or in the *Danish Girl,* Lili Elbe dies at the end of the movie due to transition-related medical



Candis Cayne was the first transwoman to have a recurring role as a transwoman on TV in *Dirty Sexy Money,* 2007.

complications. Whether or not that is true to her life, we still need to question why that's the story people are telling, why that story is the one being funded at this time of tipping. And, we have to unpack how it's perpetuating violence against trans people to cast cis people in trans roles the majority of the time. The arguments for why cis actors are necessary for the specific roles has been debunked. So, let's look at the underlying issue of transness being something one (a cis actor) puts on as a costume (to play a trans role) and how that myth becomes part of a belief system. I've spoken with trans activists who were brought on as consultants for *The Danish Girl* who gave concrete feedback on what they saw as problematic. Their feedback was completely disregarded. And the filmmakers were still able to say they "consulted with trans people," and that gave them credibility. However, this logic of tokenism will never redistribute logics of power between communities and groups.[3]

I'm trying to figure out what kind of space has been made for trans people, why it's been made, and how that benefits capitalism, because entering the mainstream media means you've become a viable commodity. As an activist and media maker, what is my responsibility in this moment of mainstream attention, especially since this kind of visibility and being a commodity was never my goal.

Alex: At this moment of the so-called Tipping Point, there has also been a related (or unrelated?) set of rather visible social justice activities and struggles around the use of restrooms that had a tipping point of its own. Do you think the visibility in dominant media of trans people and these hyper visible political issues are related?

Sam: While trans visibility alone isn't the reason, it seems like it created a new target, a face, and a singular issue for people to rally around. Since marriage equality and trans military inclusion became law, there has been an upswing in reports of backlash against LGBT rights. The media gave a ton of airtime to the legislation in North Carolina. Before that, legislatures in 22 states proposed bills threatening equal rights, with transgender people receiving the brunt of it. So, visibility has created the space for the media to see this issue as newsworthy, for now. It's inaccurate to say that trans visibility *caused* the backlash because this implies that the backlash wasn't already there.

Trans tropes as ideology

Alex: Sounds like in your research you have named a set of recognizable types or stereotypes of trans people?

Sam: I am interested in how recognizable types, stereotypes, or tropes work to create myths and ideology. We see three or four unflattering types of trans people. But, then what? Is it better to just make three or four flattering portrayals? There's more to look at, including how an audience is taught to fundamentally trust these recognizable stories. Or how filmmakers learn to mimic each other without question. What is the responsibility of the media maker in perpetuating or challenging harmful images?

Putting those questions aside for now, here are the tropes I've seen, in no particular order (although I do think there is a meaningful evolution to these portrayals which I'll show in my film).

Julia Serrano writes about two central media depictions: the "deceptive" trans person and the "pathetic" trans person.[4] The deceptive trans person is a character whose trans identity is unknown to the viewer and/or to the other characters. Early cinema uses this act of deception to create forbidden spaces and/or sexual predators. For example, Fatty Arbuckle in the film *Coney*



In the 1917 film *Coney Island* Fatty Arbuckle puts on a woman's bathing suit to relax in the women's room. He ogles the women until he is seen as a "man in a dress" and thrown out.

Island (Roscoe Arbuckle, 1917) puts on a woman's bathing suit and relaxes, ogling some women until he is discovered and thrown out. We also see deception concerning romantic desire. A character's trans identity is unnoticed by their love object because they seemingly blend into the expectations of hegemonic femininity or masculinity. Their trans identity is undetectable so their disclosure acts as an unexpected plot twist fooling innocent straight guys into falling for "men." Then the audience is expected to experience the same sense of betrayal the character in the film feels at the moment of disclosure. The classic example is Dil in *The Crying Game (*Neil Jordan, 1992*)*. This trope has appeared for 25 years on *Jerry Springer* and in the film adaptation of Gore Vidal's novel, *Myra Breckenridge* (Michael Sarne, 1970*)*.

There's the pathetic trans person who doesn't deceive anyone. Their gender is not taken seriously, and they are considered innocuous. This role is often used to create empathy in the viewer but also revulsion: for example, John Lithgow's Oscar-nominated portrayal of ex–football-player Roberta Muldoon in *The World According to Garp* (George Roy Hill, 1982) and Terence Stamp's role as the aging showgirl Bernadette in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Stephen Elliott, 1994). Even Maura Pfefferman in *Transparent* (Jill Soloway, 2014) echoes this trope.

There is the pathological psychotic trans killer in films such as *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchchock, 1960) or the lesser known *Homicidal* (William Castle, 1961), *Dressed to Kill* (Brain De Palma, 1980), *Sleep Away Camp*, (Robert Hiltzik, 1983), *Switch Killer* (Mack Hall, 2015*), The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), and *Hit & Miss* with Chloë Sevigny (Paul Abbott, 2012).



A year after Hitchcock's Psycho (1960) premiered, William Castle directed and produced *Homicidal* (1961), a film about a transman who dresses as a woman in order to kill people who know that he is trans. The trend of the trans killer continues *Dressed to Kill* (Brian De Palma, 1980), *Switch Killer* (Mack Hail, 2004), *Hit & Miss* (Paul Abbott, 2009).

Those are a few we see over and over, none of which is flattering, nuanced, or complicated. These films both reflect and intensify common tropes that teach people how to respond to trans people. For instance, in the *Crying Game*, Stephen Rae's character is not condemned for punching Dil in the face and then vomiting for a long 49 seconds of screen time. This is framed as an acceptable response to Dil having a penis. This scene has been satirized over and over again and not as a point of critique but as a point of humor like in *Ace Ventura Pet Detective* (Tom Shadyac, 1994). When this is the common experience viewers encounter when seeing trans people, should we be surprised about the high rates of transwomen being abused, threatened, or killed by the men who desire them?

Alex: What else have you learned through your research interviews about the history of representing trans people?

Sam: In my research interviews I asked a lot about dominant media. At some point I stopped experiencing the joy of mainstream films and TV because I found most of it so offensive. So I stopped watching. Every other joke is homophobic,

racist, sexist, transphobic, you name it! Why can't mainstream comedy be more clever than that? This representational history is what most marginalized groups face. By this I mean anyone who is pushed to the margins because they do not mirror the dominant center, i.e. white, cisgender, heterosexual, temporarily able-bodied, middle to upper class male – the majority of people who are in power.

This is the problem that keeps me going back to making media in hopes of impacting social movements. I believe media is the greatest myth-maker of our time and that cultural myths often lead to dominant ideologies. Media creates ideologies, and ideologies create social norms. The biggest obstacle for trans people and any marginalized group is that because we are outside the visual (and other) regimes of dominant power, we are seen as outside, different, and lesser-than. Through that process we are dehumanized. Dehumanization leads to violence, which is then systematically sanctioned in such places as the legal and the criminal justice system, health care industry, and employment and housing, thereby denying us our basic human rights.

Stories about marginalized people tend to be oriented around trauma. There has to be a traumatic event that is part and parcel of representations of transness which limits the stories being told and acts as erasure of other aspects of our diverse lives, experiences, and beliefs. And, yes, trauma is real and vital to talk about. The problem is, when that is all that gets talked about, the individual is reduced to one dimension. As activist and filmmaker Reina Gossett asks, "How do we tell the stories of people navigating enormous amounts of violence without simply reducing them to that violence"? How does that singular story affect how society sees trans people and how we see ourselves? From the research interviews I've done with trans people who work on both sides of the camera, I've learned that a majority could recount a specific scene from *The Jerry Springer Show* where a trans person was not only sensationalized and exploited but often berated or punched in the face for the amusement of the audience. I've learned that visibility does not equal progress and that we need more trans people making stories about trans lives. One of the first things film students learn is the power of writing from your own experience. And, of course some of those stories will be problematic, but I'd like to see space made for a critical mass of trans storytellers. This is not to say, by any means, that people should not write or work or speak on behalf of another's experience, but when there is so little in the canon, and much of what is in the canon is horrible and authored by cis people, it's time to prioritize trans voices.



A common topic on *Jerry Springer* is the disclosure of one's trans identity to their dates on live TV, often leading to violence.

Alex: As we both know, independent media is where this prioritization can happen. What is your understanding of a possible Tipping Point in alternative media?

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By Hook or By Crook (2001) starring, written, and directed by Harry Dodge and Silas Howard. One of the first films with a gender queer protagonist where their gender is not explained.



Falling in Love… with Chris and Greg is a comedic, web-based series drawn from the life and times of trans/cis couple Chris Vargas and Greg Youmans.



When the majority of trans masculine films

Sam: Alternative media needs *more*: *more* trans people making *more* media. It also needs narratives severed from the expected trans narrative (as seen in news shows, documentary and fiction films). We need to see transness beyond hegemonic expectations of masculinity and femininity. Get rid of trans as a metaphor for mental illness, isolation, a disruption of patriarchy, misogyny, or radical freedom. Prioritize opportunities for trans filmmakers like funding, scholarships, skill sharing, and jobs. It's no secret that we aren't hired as much limiting our economic opportunities and skill set. I left my last job because my boss stopped talking to me when he found out I was trans.

The majority of alternative queer and trans media I'm familiar with has been through the queer film festival circuit over the past 15 years.[5] [open notes in new window] Two of my earliest favorites were Morty Diamond's film *Tranny Fags* (2003) and *By Hook or By Crook* (Silas Howard and Harry Dodge, 2001). Diamond's film documents trans men having sex with both trans and cis queer men. Howard and Dodge's film is about a friendship between two gender-queer people. Both films star gender non-conforming people without explaining, apologizing, or pathologizing their gender. Gender is celebrated in all its beauty and confusion as the background to their lives. Such stories were the exception. The most common plot line in the early 2000s was on trans coming out stories.

In 2003, when I began my first documentary film (*Boy I Am*, 2006 co-directed with Julie Hollar), I watched any documentary with trans men I could find.[6] The majority of these were made by cisgender women, documenting white trans guys through a coming out story, family struggle, and then accessing surgery and hormones. This narrative is rooted in the medical industry's check-list of what makes a primary transsexual. While *Boy I Am* explored a larger issue (backlash towards trans men in the dyke community), it was informed by the tropes I saw in previous films that I accepted without question. Films about trans men were programmed (at that time) with lesbian films at film festivals. The few about transwomen at that time (2006-2008) were also coming out stories with a focus on family struggle.[7]

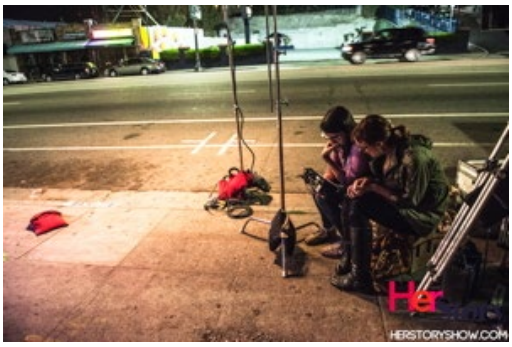
While screening my film in 2006 / 2007, I started questioning these storytelling techniques during Q&As and in writing.[8] Why did we need to see or know about one's assigned gender via photos or names? Why did we need screen time about surgery? Why did we need to hear about the struggle their gender caused for those around them? Around that time some films moved away from that narrative to document other issues in a trans person's life such as becoming a black man (Kortney Ziegler, *Still Black,* 2007), or making music (Madsen Minax, *Riot Acts*, 2009). There were fiction shorts that pushed the expected narratives like, *Falling in Love … with Chris & Greg* (Chris Vargas and Greg Youmans, 2008-2013) and *Trannymal & Trannymals Go to Court* (Dylan Vade Esq. and Abe Bernard, 2007).

In my current film, I address the lack of trans women in alternative media at that time. In dominant media there has been a lack of trans men. I saw this as more trans men were coming out of the lesbian/dyke community and wanted to remain in the queer community. There were lots of films about trans guys at queer festivals programmed by lesbians and very few with trans women. Where were the queer trans women and the films about them? What did we need to do as queer trans men and dykes to make our spaces more welcoming to queer trans women?

focused on white men, Dr. Kortney Ryan Zeigler changed the landscape with *STILL BLACK: A Portrait of Black Transmen* (2007).



Eden's Garden is the first web series to have been written, directed,and produced by, as well as starring trans men of color.



Director Sydney Freeland and writer/ actor/ producer Jen Richards in the Emmy nominated web series *Her Story*, written, directed, and produced by, as well as starring trans women.

Since then, despite these increases in the quantity of films, we still see a coming out story as the main focus. HBO just produced two this summer! However, we are also beginning to see more attention on movement building: portraits of activists and artists where the story is about the work they do as trans people within a community and not about them being trans.[9] In the early to mid-2000s, most films were about white trans men. Now there is more and more about trans women of color. Indie trans fiction made by trans people is increasing, and the trans voice is clearer.[10]

Across the films in the early 2000s, we see the foundation being laid for certain tropes and story lines in independent media. The trans subject always knew from an early age that they were trans; the film shows before and after photos; there are interviews with people in the subject's life to see how they reacted to the subject's transition; next come lots of tears and pain; the trans person might be isolated and sad and then there is an epiphany, they transition, and all is right in the world; or – the tragedy – they get completely rejected by their friends and family. These films are based on a victimhood and empathy model that I am starting to believe is a very dangerous device that usually backfires. Feeling empathy and pity become the way for a viewer to access identification to another. Pity requires a hierarchy of personhood with a power dynamic inhibiting full human rights for trans people.

For trans audiences, films with these tropes might have key information they can't access elsewhere: the effects of hormones or how best to come out to their family. But to a cis audience, the same representational tropes can reduce transness to medical transition and give cis people the impression they're entitled to information about a transgender person's body or birth given name, or that they can ask for photos of the trans person at different stages of their life. There has been some pushback against this narrative in the queer Indie film community, yet dominant media still heavily relies on these tropes. There is a dangerous lack of reflection because cisgender filmmakers haven't lived through being trans or perhaps haven't even studied the history. They enter from the side and want to tell an "interesting" story that sells without consideration of what's come before or what is needed now.

Needless-to-say, I believe in the cause and effect relationship between media and personal ideologies. Along with that, I continue to question if the idea of "representation" itself is bound to fail?

The traumatic rupture

Alex: I just watched one of those very documentaries that you referenced above on HBO. You thought they would be over, but no, here we see that exact same documentary you've outlined above. It was about tailors, a company that makes suits for gender non-conforming clients.

Sam: Oh, *Suited* (Jason Benjamin, 2016)! [11]

Alex: Did you see it?

Sam: Yea, a sweet idea done in all the wrong ways. Why did we see the sexual reassignment surgery of one of the customers? What did that have to do with getting a custom made suit for his wedding?

Alex: Exactly, it was so retro … It reminds me of all the vile possibilities that can be trotted out in the first wave of visibility (the tipping point): the voyeurism, the judgment. Every single person: you have to show a picture of them as kids? Can't

we just see them walking around in their beautiful suits? And we have to meet the parents and someone has to cry for every character? I thought we were done with that. But, that's the thing: histories of knowing and seeing are staggered. When one community reaches a saturation point of a certain kind of story or image, it's just starting for another community.

Sam: I can't help but question the director's creative process. Did he look at past films and copy that? Was he just answering his own questions? Where did he learn to ask those questions? Who advised him? Does he even know that it's rote? Did he ever question his editorial decisions? It was difficult to watch the film and then to witness the glowing reviews and mainstream support as a trans person, as a filmmaker, as an activist. From what I've read, the background is that a cis white straight guy read a story in the *NYT* about this company and thought it would make an interesting movie. This is his first feature film, produced by HBO and premiered at Sundance—a dream come true for most independent filmmakers. Coming out of nowhere, perpetuating these myths, tropes, ideologies … not looking into any of the history of trans images (at least from what was made, it seems that way). No accountability. He'd been Lena Dunham's boom operator, giving him access to kinds of institutional support that trans filmmakers don't usually have.

Alex: That film was so telling. That HBO would allow a person that has no relationship to the community to have that much air time from his voyeuristic, distanced, "I don't know anything about anything point of view." There are so many other ways this story is being told. Really, that's the one HBO supports? That says something important politically about the Tipping Point. Yes, there's more visibility, but only through the tropes you mentioned before, in this case, the curious, voyeuristic outsider who is going to have big feelings: be nauseated, or maybe it's funny, or maybe it's gross, or maybe they will be empathetic. And the end result is "acceptance"? I don't think so. That documentary was just pure prurience.

Sam: The people making the suits were great, the customers were lovely characters, but the filmmaking was problematic. What editorial control did the participants have? Do they understand the trajectory of trans storytelling that they are taking part in? What would this film have looked like if made by a trans person? A few friends of mine have been encouraging me to write about it. But, where do I start?

Alex: I could have written about it too, but I thought the Internet was going to get flooded with criticism so it didn't need my voice.

Sam: I hear that, but when a cis person gets it and speaks on it, that feels very supportive. Because the majority of cis people who speak on the state of trans media end up applauding the supportive friends and families pictured in those sorts of stories. When anyone speaks out on the problematic aspects, I for one feel less alienated from the world. What modes of trans political and representational possibility is that story keeping in place? Why is it working and always returned to? What does it do for the viewer? How does that play out with power and positioning? What is the relationship between problems with these story telling techniques and everyday challenges for trans people?

Alex: This need to return to a recognizable starting point that is always traumatic somehow grounds the whole story. There was once a stability and then there is a traumatic break when the trans person speaks the "truth" about themselves and then their whole environment destabilizes and the film works through this to re-stabilize after the family suffers and finally heals. So what happens is a story of a person's life—which could include their work, causes they care about, their favorite foods—can only be told through that moment of traumatic rupture. But

no one has one definitive traumatic rupture or a singular one. It would be interesting to see the fifth traumatic rupture. What does that look like, the fifth time the family or the person goes through it?

Sam: What do you think is so appealing about that trajectory? Why is trauma necessary for identification? How can we question the ways in which we are trained as viewers/ readers/ consumers of narrative? The viewer needs an entry point, but this format is a disservice. A family member admonished me for never telling them what my "journey" was. All I could say was it's been decades of a slow drip kind of journey—my life. There was not one exclusive thread of a "trans journey" that intersected with every other part of my life. New friends who aren't familiar with trans history similarly want to know "my story." I can't help but think that they imagine that this story will help them understand me because they've seen that format for so long. It's what they've been taught as an audience. Do they have an equally simple story to tell me?

Alex: The traumatic rupture is for the cis members of the family and a viewer constructed to be seeing from the point of view of this place within the dynamic. I think this goes back to your point about tropes and their related feelings. Every time you (the expected cis viewer) encounter a trans person, you are expected to experience a repulsion, confusion, bodily disorientation. Those stories produce this anticipated feeling again and again. They replay it and then, finally, there's a resolution so that by the film's end the cis viewer gets to feel better. One of the things I noted when I was doing similar research on early AIDS media was that stories that were supposed to be about the visibility of PWAs, and "accepting" or "empathizing" with them, would inevitably show them at their sickest, at their most visibly gruesome. These images were as much about noticing how that person was other, and different, and sick, and you, the viewer anticipated as HIV-negative, were normal, as they were about kindness or respect.



Silverlake Life: The View from Here (Tom Joslin and Peter Friedman, 1993). In this seminal AIDS activist documentary, Mark Massi is pictured by his lover, and filmmaker, Tom Joslin as HIV+, ill, and joyous.

So, each time a set of images play out again, an exact and expected set of feelings also gets played out, in the case of trans images, validating the cisgender person's confusion, disorientation, uncertainty. These images and narratives are not about the destabilization or trauma of the trans person but rather that of the cis witness. It's the same thing about demanding to see genitals. It's sensational and prurient. The experience of the trauma and healing is for the cisgender viewer. These images get a rise as opposed to watching someone living their regular daily life. That's not as exciting emotionally, right?

Sam: Right! So how can "documentary" ever be an activist tool when it relies on Hollywood tropes of storytelling where the site of trauma is the site of entry and pleasure? It feels good to feel bad. Feeling bad reaffirms the audience member as a caring, ethical person. Emotional response gets the audience's attention and despair is the easiest emotion to evoke. Tragedy, we are taught, goes hand in hand with transness. At what point does life imitate art?

Trans activism, audience, entertainment

Alex: This raises the issue that dominant films imagine a cisgender viewer that does not view trans subjects as sexually interesting or as visually desirable. These films are based on imagined cis viewers who are going to be repulsed, confused, or concerned but you can also make films for a different cis audience, one who finds trans people in their lovely suits very appealing.

Sam: This is largely why I make my films for queer and trans audiences. It differs from mainstream media because there's an assumption of identification, desire, and understanding that some think might alienate cis viewers. But that idea is also pretty flat. As my friend and filmmaker Silas Howard says, "I'm not French

but I can see a French film. I'm not a shark but I can watch *Jaws*."

Alex: Part of activist media making, as I've thought about it, is that you as the media maker have clear commitments about your anticipated viewer. Certainly one anticipated viewer for activist media can be the dominant public. You can make an activist film to convince them of something. But there's also activist media that's made internally for communities. Here, you are making a trans film where you assume a trans audience or trans friendly audience or queer audience will find the trans subjects attractive, beautiful, desirable, sexy, interesting.

Sam: Right. Then the point of rupture that takes the viewer from disgust to acceptance/ identification isn't needed. That's why I'm less interested in making something "for" a dominant audience, because of the limitations of that access point. I'm more interested in making things that could be of use to (to empower, educate, support, be a tool for) a transgender viewer or those invested in our human rights. I never anticipate a dominant audience, and to some degree don't desire it, because it requires the above tropes and expected point of rupture to sell.

And, at the same time, my career can only go so far before I need a larger audience, at least if I want access to production, funding, and distribution and to pay my rent and bills. Thus, I have to hold both audiences in mind at most times. We are in a moment of more possibility, where more people from all walks of life want to learn about and see stories about trans people's lives. It seems inevitable that this shift will also change how I envision my audience, even if I don't want that. Just by the nature of this moment more people are interested in the work I'm doing. We are on the radar of broadcasters and funders in ways like never before. And, two HBO films I saw this past summer—*Suited* and *The Trans List* (Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, 2016), actually both made by white, straight, cisgender men—functioned in the problematic ways we've been discussing so far. I'm conscious about how making work for a dominant audience will affect my decisions around telling the story. I hate when it enters my mind actually because for a split second I might consider how to make this or that more accessible. I teetered on that for an opportunity to work with Lana Wachowski and ultimately decided it wasn't worth it.

Alex: As someone who's been at activist media for a long time, I don't think there is a right answer to your question. Rather, there are people in our movements who are capable of speaking to a broader public and they should do that work. And then there's people like me, and I'm certainly not capable of that work. I realize

that's just not my function in the larger project. I don't think one is more politically correct or one is right or wrong. I think movements need both. With AIDS activist media there were people doing both and everything in-between. I think it was a successful media movement in part because even when it had its "tipping point"—and now it's even enjoying a second tipping point—when there was mainstream acceptability, visibility, curiosity, at the very same time, an active body of work was being made within and for the movement. Those two things were connected. That said, the window where the mainstream is interested to fund and support you is very small, so you should go for it, if it's there now!

Sam: It's looking like filmmakers have to present very specific narratives to access that support.

Alex: What are the things you think they want to see or hear?

Sam: All the tropes we talked about before—the journey, focus on genitals, isolation, rejection, childhood photos, victim, tragedy, the traumatic rupture, the victory of self-discovery. And some of this is valuable to a *trans* audience. A lot of what we see in trans media is not appropriate for a cis audience. It's very different for a trans person to watch a surgery than a cis person.

But, I want to circle back. You said you saw evidence of success for the activist media you were doing around HIV/AIDS. What does success mean in that case? What did it look like?

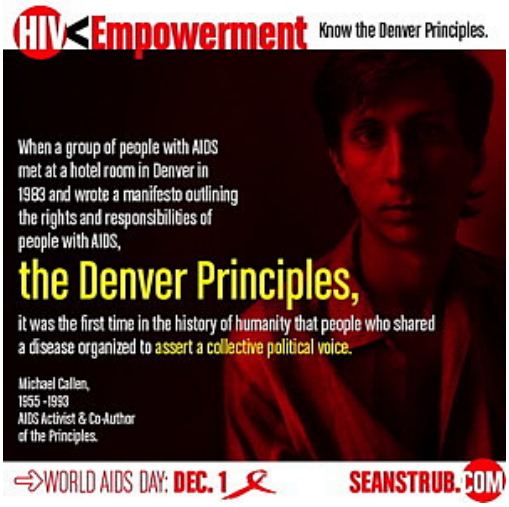
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA





Denise Ribble demonstrates how to use a dental dam in *Living with AIDS: Women and AIDS* (Alexandra Juhasz and Jean Carlomusto, 1987)

Activist media success

Alex: In relationship to activist media about HIV/AIDS, I think of success when, for a short window of time, dominant society's ideas about how to know and think about HIV/AIDS was, at least in part, being controlled by us. At that time, we changed some of the terms and some of the understandings of AIDS in our culture. For instance, we created, defined, used and promoted the terms PWA (Person with AIDS) [12] and safer sex. [13] [open notes in new window]

From that, political and social change occurred. Then, when we stepped away from naming things, showing things, telling things, from our point of view, the agenda shifted right back to where it was. So, I learned that it's a constant job, and we did walk away from it, mostly because people were dying and sad. But we did have a voice that we fought hard for and used for many of the years of the conversation. And that is a position I think that trans media is in right now. Trans media makers and activists are part of the discourse in the culture right now, naming terms (alongside others), naming the questions. Trans people can play some part in the direction of the society's understandings as long as the movement stays diligent and makes a lot of media, as long as you participate in staying visible. As soon as that stops, it defaults back to the stupid place it was: the most bigoted place where there is no respect. It just goes back there. And it's exhausting to keep the work up.

Sam: Why do you think that cycle is inevitable?

Alex: The dominant culture doesn't care about us or our issues, so it's going to default to the place of stupidity, the generic place of comfort which is knowing things in a very simplistic, dogmatic, power-ridden way. The nuance, the complexity of difference and its demands, that's what activist media provides, the other narratives, the harder questions (like the ones that start and will also end this conversation). Do you need to ask these hard questions in a representational formula that's familiar? Maybe. Again that's not something I've ever been able to do. But, you're still bringing new questions to the table, questions that dominant society is not going to ask because it doesn't think it is implicated.

That's the other job of activist media: to implicate. Of course everyone is implicated in HIV/AIDS. Of course everyone is implicated in the lived experience, the civil rights and human dignity of all human beings who live in our society. Why wouldn't you be implicated? The fact that our political movements for human autonomy and justice aren't deeply held by most people in this society is mysterious to me. But that's what our activist media work is: to help people see that they are connected, implicated. We don't need empathy like you were saying before, "oh, boo hoo, I care for you, isn't that sad? I see your feelings." Instead, our work is successful when we help others see that they are implicated because they live in a society where some people have access to things and others don't.

Sam: Perhaps that's why people are more open to messages when they feel empathy rather than feeling implicated. They'll reject stories that focus on their implication, but embrace a story that helps them access feelings of empathy via a sustained difference. They can leave the theater thinking they have done their part, had their feelings. And, they are not responsible for any more work towards

justice and equality. How do we get the audience to question the usefulness of visibility – in particular when visibility puts populations in harm's way due to systematized oppression via class, race, religion, ability, citizenship, etc. Perhaps visibility isn't the goal after all?

Alex: Viewers certainly like media that allows them to enjoy simple, recognizable emotions that feel big and then go away. But they don't want complexity and nuance. They don't want an uncommon and unresolvable feeling.

The efficacy of media activism

Sam: I'm starting to question the efficacy of media activism!

Alex: Don't say that here in this essay! [laughter] But really, what do you mean?

Sam: The idea that activism is relegated to a specific action is ridiculous at best and oppressive at worst. Activist concerns inform how I navigate all aspects of my life, in the world, every day. But, more on that later. In terms of this essay, I wonder, to what extent am I, as a media maker, implicated in dominant media that I feel is so destructive? I've been motivated by social justice to make media about trans lives. Witnessing the dominant media's focus on trans people's lives now as a "hot new trend" motivated by the bottom line (i.e. money) causes great dissonance. Sure, there are some activist voices being heard because of the mainstream attention, but will it last? Or is it just a blip that will easily fade out while the narratives-of-the-day that HBO is putting out become louder and louder? Will queer and trans media makers with the privilege of money and power continue to exploit those of us who have less money and power like I experienced with Lana Wachowski? This has also happened to my friends with other richer more powerful filmmakers. But it's not my business to share those details. Here's a very short recap of my experience with Wachowski to give context. After I finished the film *Kate Bornstein is a Queer & Pleasant Danger* (2014), Wachowski approached me about making a second version that was more accessible to the mainstream. After a few months, I realized I wasn't on board with her storytelling decisions (they echoed some of the tropes I mentioned earlier). So we parted ways. But she had copies of all the footage I shot for over four years of Kate before Lana and I ever started working together. I asked her to destroy or return all my footage and she refused. Who knows what she will do with it? To this day she has copies of my footage. It's not technically illegal until she tries to use it. But, she's certainly asserting her power over me by keeping my property without my consent. And, when she does use it, will I have the financial means to legally stop her?

Alex: As you know, there are activist practices for making media, not simply activist content. You make this very clear in your difficult story above. When the



Reed Erickson founded the Erickson Educational Foundation. According to sociologist Aaron H. Devor, Erickson has informed almost every aspect of work being done in the field of transsexualism in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s.



After marrying her second husband in 1944, Lucy Hicks Anderson was charged with perjury when local authorities learned she was assigned male at birth. Her response was "I defy any doctor in the world to prove I am not a woman. I have lived, dressed, acted just what I am, a woman." She was charged later for fraud and sent to

making feels empowering, collective-building, when in the process you are engaged in a world where all are implicated and all enjoy the dignity of access to full personhood and linked expression, that's activism in and of itself. A significant part of activist media occurs for me in the making, in the community, what production and reception does for the individual maker, the activist, the people you are working with, interviewing, talking to. A critical, embodied, engaged making is where some of the best (of) activism occurs. We are changed in that process. And the object itself, the video, does it change the world? I'm less sure about that as a simple one-to-one equation. Of course other things can happen at reception, which can be activist as well, if watching encourages a viewer to then produce themselves. I don't necessarily only mean produce media. I mean produce an activist engagement for themselves in the world.

As someone who has been engaged in several past media movements that I now see being historicized, media activists might not alone, or in one video, make change. But we are players in a much larger constellation and we have an important role there, in our movements: a small one and a necessary one. Without our images, movements won't be running on all cylinders because the people that we are engaged with, in opposition with, they certainly have media at their disposal. Without us, we'd only have their images. Right? So, you should make activist media! Your images feed us. And you need to be fed! Are there key moments in the history of trans activist media that have sustained you?

Sam: How are we defining trans activist media? Is it the process of making, who's making it, or the activism itself being captured on media? And, how can we trace that history when some people are stealth? [15]

Most of the images we see from the past of trans people are not of activist moments per se. What's more common are headshots of a person who was known to be trans or "discovered" to be after their death. Thinking of early trans activism, I can only recall a few images of Angela Douglas protesting *Myra Breckenridge* in the 70s or Reed Erickson launching the Erickson Educational Foundation in the 60s, or Lucy Hicks Anderson in the 40s who was sent to prison for receiving (via her husband) federal money reserved for military spouses. How have these moments been used for trans media activism?

In terms of images of trans media activism, the first thing that comes to mind is the iconic video of Sylvia Rivera getting shooed and booed off the platform by gays and lesbians at a gay liberation rally in 1973. That video has become part of so many people's memories of trans activism and the resistance towards trans people from the larger LG movement. I also think of a photo of Sylvia and Marsha together at that same rally holding a STAR banner. I think about Lou Sullivan in the 80s and the VHS footage of talk show interviews where he reflects on how he

prison for receiving federal money (via her husband) reserved for military spouses.

was repeatedly denied surgery because he identified as a gay man. After testing positive for HIV he wrote, “I took a certain pleasure in informing the gender clinic that even though their program told me I could not live as a Gay man, it looks like I’m going to die like one.” I also think about Loren Cameron’s cover photo on his book, *Body Alchemy* (1996). This was the first image I saw of someone injecting testosterone, an image that has now become an overused trope. And, of course, going back to the 50s, I think of the images of Christine Jorgenson on the cover of the *Daily News* and getting off the plane. Iconic images of Les Feinberg come to mind, speaking to crowds of workers or students with ze’s fist in the air or ze’s unyielding and defiant stare into the camera. And, the image of Les visiting CeCe McDonald in prison bringing awareness to the Free CeCe campaign. I also revel in the image of Reina Gosset and Liz Bishop, during the NYC Trans Day of Action. Reina is holding a sign that says, “This is our Life, This is our Time.” I also think of the images of the riot at Compton's Cafeteria that Susan Stryker and Victor Silverman made iconic through their film *Screaming Queens* (2005).





(Above) Lou Sullivan founded FTM International, one of the first organizations specifically for FTM individuals.

(Left) Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera at the 1973 Gay Liberation parade the same day Sylvia was booed off the stage.

Current historical moments are often captured on our phones and seen through social media outlets like the photo of Reina and Liz. Or Jennicet Gutiérrez speaking up during Obama’s LGBT victory speech in 2015.[16] She got heckled in the same way Silvia did in 1973. As a media maker, I think media activism is not limited to a finished product but is also reflected in the production process, in the ethics of interviews and conversation, in skill sharing, hiring, and how we treat our team when making work. That’s trans activism in production. I was recently on a set for a film written and directed by a queer trans person. An established cisgender DP was flown in to work with them. At the end of the last day of the shoot, he made a point to tell the director that they were spending too much time “being nice” and checking in with everyone. When he walked away, we all agreed to ignore that comment! That was an activist moment of departure from industry standards.





(Above) Reina Gosset and Liz Bishop, NYC Trans Day of Action.

(Left) Cece McDonald and Les Feinberg's hand. Les posted this photo of visiting CeCe McDonald in prison bringing awareness to the Free CeCe campaign.

Trans media activism/feminist media activism

Alex: Can you further discuss the links between trans media activism and feminist and queer activism? For example, feminist filmmaking has always understood that communities of care in production are part of feminist film production.

Sam: The productions I've been part of are entirely informed by feminist media making. This comes down to the dissemination of power, working in a collaborative, accountable space, hiring people invested in the topic, job training, mentorship, making space for checking in to see how people are feeling – a holistic sense of care and responsibility for each other within production and outside of it. Process as product. Being transparent about how things come to fruition, funding, and budget, how decisions are made; being ruthless in accountability and in connecting to the historical past; nodding to our past, showing legacy and connection.



Aida and her son Miguel, from *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS* (The Women's AIDS Video Enterprise, 1990).

A feminist tradition that has informed my non-fiction work is attention to the distribution of power. I give my subjects editorial power over their image. If they say something they regret in the moment or a month later, they can tell me, and I will delete it. I ask them to try and not do that once I lock the film, but I will respect their needs at any time. And, I believe in offering compensation.[17] I'm not speaking for journalism or news broadcast but for a video or film documentary that requires time and knowledge from the participants. Among many of the arguments against compensating the subject, the one I have the most trouble with is that the truth is compromised if there is compensation. What is "truth" when the director makes the editing decisions? These are myths perpetuated in the name of colonialism and exploitation, racism and classism. As documentary filmmakers, we are using other people's lives to make our work. Subjects for these documentaries should be offered compensation for their time and their knowledge. It's very simple math.[18]

Alex: When I made *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS* (1990)with a collective of women in NYC, we worked together for six months. I couldn't pay people, but I did give them trainfare and food at every meeting. We then got a distribution grant to show the film and as part of that paid everyone who showed the film (in their own communities) a fee for that work. So I'm totally with you here, Sam, about paying people for their time, knowledge, and labor! This is only one way to manifest my understanding of feminist filmmaking and film theory where there its awareness of power being written into all aspects

of media making. This is opposed to most filmmaking that has historically and still does pretend there is no power at stake, or that even if there is, it doesn't really matter, leading to ruthless abuses of the camera's, filmmaker's and cinema's power. This also goes to dominant practices for depicting people as well. Our responsibility as activist, feminist media makers is to also think about remaking or unmaking those traditional dynamics that produce images where power is written into what and who we see—not only in being uni-directional (from camera to subject; from viewer to image)—but in those how those interactions are colonial or objectifying or dominating in connection to the ways that power structures the scene of seeing and being seen. Do you think of your work on this film and others as activism? Do you think of your research as activism?

Sam: I wonder about the nature of activism vs. education vs. art, and the intersections. Is there anything to gain by teasing those differences out? My work —filmmaking, teaching, community building, volunteering—is all informed by my activist concerns, as is my personal life. I used to feel like unless I was on the front line it was dishonest to call myself an activist. Instead, I thought maybe my work would be used as a tool for activism. Or, as Kate Bornstein says, she's "an artist in service to activism," taking cues from activist issues, hoping her work will be of use. I'm dedicated to the act of making media being an activist act. Just as I'm dedicated to everyday activism as way of life. All my actions are concerned with and informed by what I've learned through activism and how I want to see the world function. So, all of my work stems from, is informed by, my current activist concerns.

Alex: I think anyone who is being thoughtful about the function of their media work has to have these moments of doubt. I too think that media making is proto-activist, or as you said, in service to activism. Activism needs these images and ideas. Artists and theorists think about, articulate, and share complicated ideas that motivate and educate people, and from that activism occurs. So the media is proto-activism: it inspires, initiates, sets into motion. Activism is when somebody takes this and then goes to the streets, or cares for another or themselves, changes a law, says no at a particularly important moment. Artists register and express the ideas of the moment, and movement, in ways that people who aren't artists dearly need (and to be clear, I think everyone can, and should be an artist. Expressing ideas about our world, or communities, or experiences is one of those core human rights that all should have equal access to. Thus, expanding access to art-making/personal-expression is one of my core activist goals). Artists who are activists, at times engage in this fundamental human right in relationship to political movements. They express, manifest, analyze, and articulate ideas that sustain themselves as well as their movement.

Intersectionality, commodification and more questions

Alex: To begin to wrap up, do you think there is something unique about trans media activism? Is there something that makes it different from feminist or queer activism, anti-racist media activism, the other identity-based movements that we are familiar with?



Jennicet Gutiérrez speaking out at the White House.

Sam: Unique? It's not isolated from any of those movements! Trans people are feminists, queer, lesbian and gay, of all ethnicities and races and citizenship, class, ability, religion, etc. We are inherently dealing with all those issues at the forefront of our movement. Two of the most famous trans people are trans women of color who diligently work towards racial, economic, and gender justice. How lucky are trans activists that Laverne Cox, who became famous for her acting, is an activist? And that Janet Mock, years into her mainstream success, stays at the forefront of current activist concerns? The movement, in many areas (not all) has become a manifestation of intersectional theory.

Alex: Yes, some of the earlier media activist movements took longer to understand that each one of those "identity" positions was deeply written into each of the others, and also laced through the movement. Or maybe because trans media activism's "tipping point" comes so much later in history, it can't help but begin from that place of intersectional knowledge. So, maybe that's a wonderful legacy from which to end this conversation. What else did you learn?

Sam: I liked learning about the trajectory of other social movements and their media activism. How HIV/AIDS media activism created ideas or terms that it said over and over until it showed up in the dominant media (Silence = Death). I think the growing social awareness around the murders of trans women, specifically trans women of color, is a success of that model. What more can we, as trans media makers, all agree on that would help to push our activist needs forward?

The bulk of what I've learned is based on questions I am still ruminating on: Is commodification inevitable for an identity-based social movement? Is a social justice movement sustainable without becoming commodified and what does that look like? What happens to the movement and the individual once they become commodified? What has this trajectory looked like for previous social justice movements? What have they done once their images have become a commodity? How do we talk about the history of an identity-based movement when we're using a context and language that is changing so rapidly? For example, what does a trans identity mean in early twentieth century film? At what point is a character cross-dressing vs. transgressing gender or doing both? Were there any roles in the past that mirror what we understand a trans identity to be today?

And there are more questions: is there any way to avoid the singular story when we are dealing with mass media? I'm also starting to question what does "mainstream" even mean? Is it about reflecting and shaping prevailing currents of

thought? Or about being a viable commodity? What does the past for trans people tell us about contemporary trans lives? What do contemporary lives tell us about the past? What do catch phrases mean once they've entered the public vernacular? For example, when you hear people who have no experience with the queer community say or stumble over saying LGBT and they say it like it's one thing, "an LGBT person, blah blah blah..." What does that mean to them? Because I don't know anyone who is L & G & B & T. I'm thinking about the emergence in TV news and talk shows of the use of the phrase "trans women of color." It's phenomenal that the public is starting to understand the role and significance of trans women of color in our community, but do they? Do they know how that identity-based term became so important for so many people? Do they understand the urgency? And do we need them to understand? What happens when such phrases enter popular culture?

Also, I've also been questioning the lack of trans masculine visibility in dominant media. Is it about a threat to masculinity or simply due to misogyny or something else entirely? How does technology create identity? How do images inform how we create our own identity? What are the intersections of media technology and the science of medical transition and identity? Do trans lives threaten capitalism? Lots and lots of questions is where I am at right now even as I learn more from my research, my media making, my activism, and even this conversation.[19]

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Notes

1. When we use the word *trans*, in this moment in Fall 2016, it is an umbrella term used to describe people with a gender identity and/or gender expression different from what they were assigned at birth. This term has evolved and changed over time and we assume it will continue to do so in order to reflect the current needs of transgender communities. [return to page 1]

2. For more on the politics of casting in the mainstream see Diana Tourjee, Jen Richards, and Monica Roberts.

3. I'm paraphrasing Chase Joynt here from a conversation we had about this issue.

4. See Serrano, *Whipping Girl* , 2007

5. A more detailed list of alternative trans media will be explored more thoroughly in my film and book on the topic. The majority of this conversation focuses on feature docs; a few shorts are included. My film and book will also include films beyond what I could afford to see at the festivals or what we have time to discuss here. [return to page 2]

6. I remember watching: *A Boy Named Sue* (Julie Wyman, 2001), *Just Call Me Kade* (Sam Zolten, 2001), *Southern Comfort* (Kate Davis, 2001), *Sir, Just a Normal Guy* (Melanie La Rosa, 2001), *Shinjuku Boys* (Kim Longinitto and Jano Williams, 1995), *You Don't Know Dick: Courageous Hearts of Trans Men* (Bestor Cram, 1997), *The Branden Teena Story (*Susan Muska and Greta Olafsdottir, 1998*)*, *Gendernauts* (Monika Treut, 1999).

7. *Prodigal Sons* (Kimberly Reed, 2008), *Red without Blue* (Brooke Sebold and Benita Sills, 2006), *She's a Boy I Knew* (Gwen Haworth, 2007)

8. Sam Feder and Dean Spade, "Sparking Difficult Dialogues: On Trans Documentaries," *Make/Shift Magazine*, 2007.

9. A few that come to mind are *Major!* (Annalise Ophelian, 2016) about Miss Major Griffin Gracy and, *Transvisible* (Dante Alencastre, 2013) about Bambi Salcedo, *Happy Birthday Marsha* (Reina Gossett and Sasha Wortzel, 2017) about Marsha P. Johnson.

10. In 2012 Rhys Ernst directed *The Thing*. More recently, Eden's Garden (Seven King, 2015) and the Emmy nominated You Tube series, *Her Story* (Sydney Freeland, 2016).

11. Taken from the film's website "SUITED follows its subjects—clients seeking a personalized experience—into the minimalist office space of Bindle & Keep, a bespoke tailoring company based in Brooklyn that caters to a diverse LGBTQ community and looks beyond the gender binary, creating custom-made suits for gender-nonconforming and transgender clients."

12. The Denver Principles, which came from early 1982 self-empowerment activism begin: “We condemn attempts to label us as ‘victims,’ a term that implies defeat, and we are only occasionally ‘patients,’ a term that implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence upon the care of others. We are ‘People With AIDS.’” [return to page 3]

13. Jean Carlomusto’s recent documentary, *Sex in an Epidemic* (2011), focuses on this history.

14. Chuck Kleinhans correctly reminds us that “the remarks on empathy, feelings —of course this is the basis of Aristotelean drama and Brecht’s critique of ‘culinary drama.’” See http://nebo-lit.com/drama/illusion-and-alienation-drama.html.

15. Stealth refers to trans people who choose to not disclose their trans identity.

16. In June 2015 President Obama invited a LGBTQ constituency to the White House. He discussed how trans women of color are being targeted. Jennicet Gutiérrez spoke out about his administration holding LGBTQ and trans immigrants in detention. For more see http://www.washingtonblade.com/2015/06/25/exclusive-i-interrupted-obama-because-we-need-to-be-heard/

17. An honorarium, a meal, a barter, etc.

18. Because of tabloid culture there is an association that it is sleazy to pay someone. Why isn’t it sleazy to *not* pay someone for their time and knowledge?

19. All the conversations I have with colleagues and friends greatly informed my thoughts and ideas in this essay. In particular, the research interviews I did for my upcoming film and conversations with Ted Kerr, Joseph Hankins, Finn Paul, Vika Kirchenbauer, Aleksei Wagner, Amy Scholder, Alex Berg, Chase Joynt and Cris Beam.

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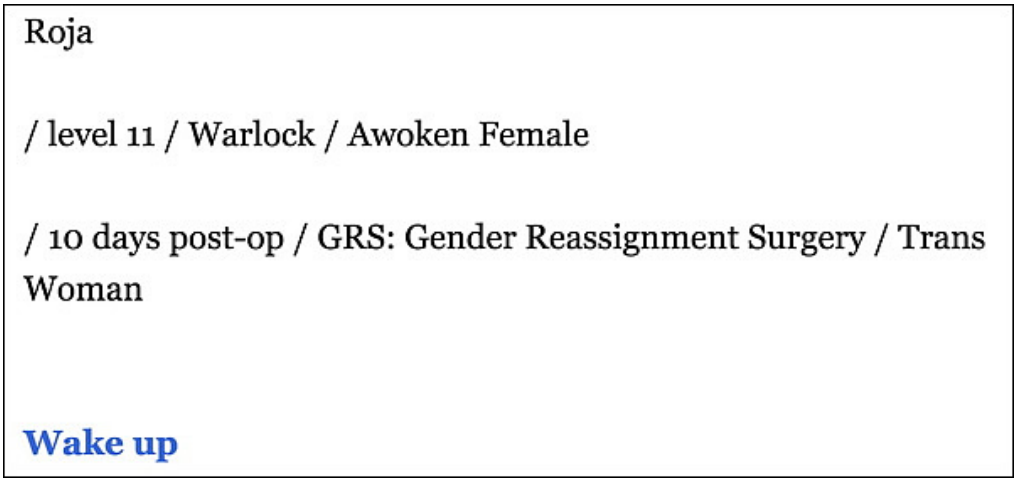
JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Dilating Destiny: writing the transreal body through game design

by micha cárdenas



Edited screen shot from *Destiny*, showing the author's avatar.



Screen shot from *Dilating Destiny*.

Play *Dilating Destiny* here.

Destiny is a video game produced by Bungie and published by Activision, released in 2014, which is a clear example of what are referred to as Triple-A games. The franchise had a development budget of $500 million and "sold more than $325 million worldwide in the first five days" (Acuna). The game includes richly detailed 3-dimensional environments set on future versions of earth, the moon, Venus and Mars, among other planets. *Dilating Destiny* is a small, text-based game, available online, which I created with no production budget. *Dilating Destiny* is an obscure, personal game that very few people have played. I see *Dilating Destiny* as part of a genre of text-based games by trans women such as Merritt Kopas, which she describes in her article "Trans Women & The New Hypertext." My essay is intended to elucidate my inspirations for making the game, as well as situate it within the trajectory of my artwork and other artistic fields. *Dilating Destiny* was inspired by philosophers writing about drugs, and poetry and video games made by trans women. *Dilating Destiny* uses an aesthetic I have described as *transreal*, in that it blends truth and fiction and includes a performance of identities in both the reality of present day life and that of the online world of *Destiny*.

Theoretical inspirations

Avital Ronell is a contemporary philosopher of technology, literature and deconstruction. The “EB on Ice” section of Ronell's book *Crack Wars* takes a science fiction story as its form and uses it to analyze the link between “electronic culture… cyberpunk projection… virtual reality” and “drug culture” by imagining futures of pharmaceuticals that facilitate identity transformations (68). She writes,

> “The girl ahead of me chose their six-month girloid program… I picked the hologrammatology program, because I needed to be in several places at the same time, and I didn’t want to fall into facile identifications”(67).

In that sense, Ronell’s work is similar to my game *Dilating Destiny*, which considers the experience of playing a video game while taking a large amount of pharmaceutical drugs. Ronell’s goals, as a philosopher, are expansive. Her book begins by responding to German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who states “addiction and urge are possibilities rooted in the thrownness of Dasein” (2004). Ronell deals with the question of engaging with Heidegger's work in great detail in *The Telephone Book*, due to her Jewish heritage and his association with the Nazi party. My own reading practice is informed by Ronell's, in that I also believe that some value can be found in the works of writers and artists whose lives may include actions that are unethical, and as such I choose not to completely dismiss Heidegger's writing. In particular I find useful the way Heidegger describes the *thrownness* of being as the quality of being off center, unstable, thrown. I read this in relation to my own work on necropolitical affect, or the feeling of life under necropolitcal regimes, which I will explain further.

Ronell’s invention of the word *hologrammatology* imagines a science fiction future of multiple bodies by way of Derrida’s grammatology, a chain of significations revealed through deconstruction. Pulling apart this word, which combines the words *grammatology* with *hologram*, allows one to bring in Achille Mbembe, the theorist who has described the deadliness of the dystopian neoliberal present we live in as *necropolitics*. Mbembe states that invisible killings are perpetrated by state and non-state actors today, facilitated by surveillance technologies including "*hologrammization*" (29). Holographic maps are used by the U.S. military to enhance targeting with 3-dimensional imaging (Dawson, 1). Mbembe's description of the constant threat of death for subjects in Palestine has relevance for black and trans people around the world who experience the daily

threat of murder.

Dilating Destiny tells a story of a time of daily news of deaths of black and trans, where the news kicks the main character when she is down, coming to her in a moment of already being off center, displaced, lying down, wounded, bleeding and healing from a wound, yet still yearning to get up and join the struggle for justice. The game is concerned with the feeling or the affect of the contemporary moment. *Dilating Destiny* is a text based game that uses a transreal aesthetic, which I will describe further below, to explore the experience of recovering from Gender Reassignment Surgery. The form of *Dilating Destiny* is an interactive series of web pages created with the Twine platform. (Twine is a game authoring software that allows user to easily create interactive stories with multiple branches and algorithmic logic, and it exports HTML so that the games are playable in a web browser.) The story in *Dilating Destiny* mixes real and fictional events, blurring the lines between everyday experiences of pain, medication and political solidarity with the fictional storyline of the game *Destiny,* published by Activision.

Trans-feminine writing as *écriture trans-féminine*

Dilating Destiny engages with the history of *écriture au trans-féminine*, or trans-feminine writing,[1] [open endnotes in new window] a literature of intoxication and performative experiments with the body (Billingham 2010). Cixous argued for *écriture feminine*, which can be translated as women's writing or feminine writing, meaning that women must write literature because their bodies give them access to different kind of knowledge and language that had until then not been expressed or had been actively silenced (1976). She called on women to write the experience of their bodies (Cixous, 1976). Writing about transgender mixed race poet Trish Salah, Susan Billingham, Associate Professor of Canadian Studies at the University of Nottingham,

> "traces a continuum between French feminist ecriture feminine, quebecoise/Canadian ecriture au feminin, and Salah's oeuvre. If ecriture feminine returns to the woman's body to reconsider sexual difference, recuperate suppressed voices, and construct feminine subjectivity, then what I call an ecriture au trans-feminine seeks to achieve similar recognition of the trans-woman's voice and body... At stake in the notion of ecriture au trans-feminine is precisely the question of agency: the transwoman's claim to participate in liberatory gendered discourse as a woman" (2010).

My work is in dialog with Salah's in our shared concern for understanding trans-feminine experience as a contested site of agency, uncertainty and blurred boundaries. Many of my artworks have begun with an attempt to articulate the philosophical implications of my experiences as a transgender woman, including those of being the subject in transition, bodily transformation and beginning taking prescribed hormones in *Becoming Dragon (2009)*;and more recently, the effects of stopping taking prescribed hormones on one's mental, emotional and physical state in *Pregnancy (2016)*. Both of these projects have been described by myself and others as *bioart*, beginning with engagements with my own biological material and using that as the basis for making art. Bioart is a genre of art often presented in museums and galleries and it extends the history of performance art's concern with the body to consider non-human bodies, parts of bodies and biological technologies. In *Becoming Dragon* I lived for 365 hours in a mixed reality environment using motion capture and a head-mounted display to perform with both my physical body and with a dragon avatar in the online 3-dimensional multi-user environment of *Second Life*. In the performance space I had my hormone prescription bottles on display and many of the poems I performed

considered the relations between the biological transformations I was experiencing and my online virtual enbodiment.

All three of these works—*Becoming Dragon, Pregnancy* and *Dilating Destiny*—begin by phenomenologically examining embodied experiences in order to challenge any simple notion of transgender as a binary crossing from one gender to another. I was connecting lines of flight across boundaries of species, scale and speculative realities. As my character in *Dilating Destiny* is non-human, the question of embodying another species is relevant here. Many other transgender authors and theorists have considered ways that transgender experience can have broader relevance to other forms of embodiment.

These works are also part of a history of engagements with the meaning, language and narratives of transgender experience as seen in the writing of Trish Salah and Sandy Stone. In *Wanting in Arabic,* in the poem "where skin breaks," Trish Salah writes:

> "tearing through these skins: male, female, female, male
>
> until the body's ceased to matter
>
> *the body never does cease to matter"*
>
> (2002, 38)

In Salah's poem I read a challenge that transsexual experiences of bodily transformation present to thought: how to exceed the identitarian limitations of an individual body to create poetry and theory that resonates with others, by engaging with experiences through one's own body as it changes form. Salah's writing responds to French feminists such as Helene Cixous, who wrote that "woman must write woman. And man, man," making a claim that now seems overly binary and simplified in a world of an increasing proliferation of forms of gender non-conformity (1976, 877). Yet when I first read Cixous' words, I heard a story that resonated with my own experience as a trans woman yearning to "write" my own body by transitioning:

> "She must write her self, because this is the invention of a new *insurgent* writing which, when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history… Write your self. Your body must be heard," (1976, 880).

When Cixous states "I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs," I hear an opening for fantastic science fiction imaginings of transformations into unimagined bodies. I referenced Cixous' work in one of the poems in my performance *Becoming Dragon* in order to link her idea of writing the body with my performance of a transgender body and a dragon avatar simultaneously (1976, 876; 2012, 124). *Dilating Destiny* continues this trajectory, writing myself into previously unimagined bodies, in this case the body of an alien race known as the Awoken, which is the race of my character in the game *Destiny*.

The way we experience the virtual bodies we inhabit in games is through our experience and memory of our own body. Vivian Sobchack writes,

> "We do not experience any movie only with our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and knowledge of our sensorium." (2000)

One can extend to games as well the way that Sobchack rejects the binary split between film and audience. Elsewhere I have articulated the *stitch* as a kind of

gesture in a trans of color poetics. I argue that stitching can be seen in the work of trans artists of color in the form of stitching fabric, stitching together code into algorithms, and stitching as connecting communities. I understand Sobchack's description of film as connecting her body to the bodies on screen as a kind of stitching that has relevance for understanding video games made by trans women. Sobchack looks to Steven Shaviro's Deleuzian theorization of the place of the body in the experience of film. Sobchack quotes Shaviro, who states:

> "There is no structuring lack, no primordial division, but a continuity between the physiological and affective responses of my own body and the appearances and disappearances, the mutations and perdurances, of the bodies and images on screen. The important distinction is not the hierarchical, binary one between bodies and images, or between the real and its representations. It is rather a question of... degrees of stillness and motion, of action and passion, of clutter and emptiness, of light and lack. ... For a fugitive, supplemental materiality haunts the (allegedly) idealizing processes of mechanical reproduction. ...The flesh is intrinsic to the cinematic apparatus, at once its subject, its substance, and its limit."

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These affective continuities hold true for digital, virtual bodies as seen in digital games as well, perhaps more so, thanks to the interactive way in which a player inhabits a virtual body by taking a degree of control over its movement. In *The Transreal: Political Aesthetics of Crossing Realities* I write:

> "I propose that transreal aesthetics cross the boundaries of realities created by a fragmentation of reality that occurred as a result of postmodern theory and emerging technologies... thinkers such as [Jack] Halberstam, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gilles Deleuze propose a multiplicity of times and spaces which coexist. From there, one can look at contemporary artists' attempts to create and work with realities as a similar form of multiplicity" (2008, 18).

In the book, I consider artists working with recent technologies including augmented reality and mixed reality, as well as artists who create works that they describe as alternate reality games. *The Transreal* describes transreal methods including transreal performativity—performing multiple simultaneous characters in different realities; transreal technologies that function on logics that exceed reality such as imaginary computational systems; and constructing transrealities —building narratives and environments that blend truth and fiction. In part, this method is meant to subvert the common dynamic of cisgender audiences who voyeuristically wish to know the truth of trans experience. I understand the audience for *Dilating Destiny* as including trans people with whom I wish to share some of the experience of dilation, as this is rarely discussed. For cisgender players/readers, I hope to expand their conception of trans experience and politics.

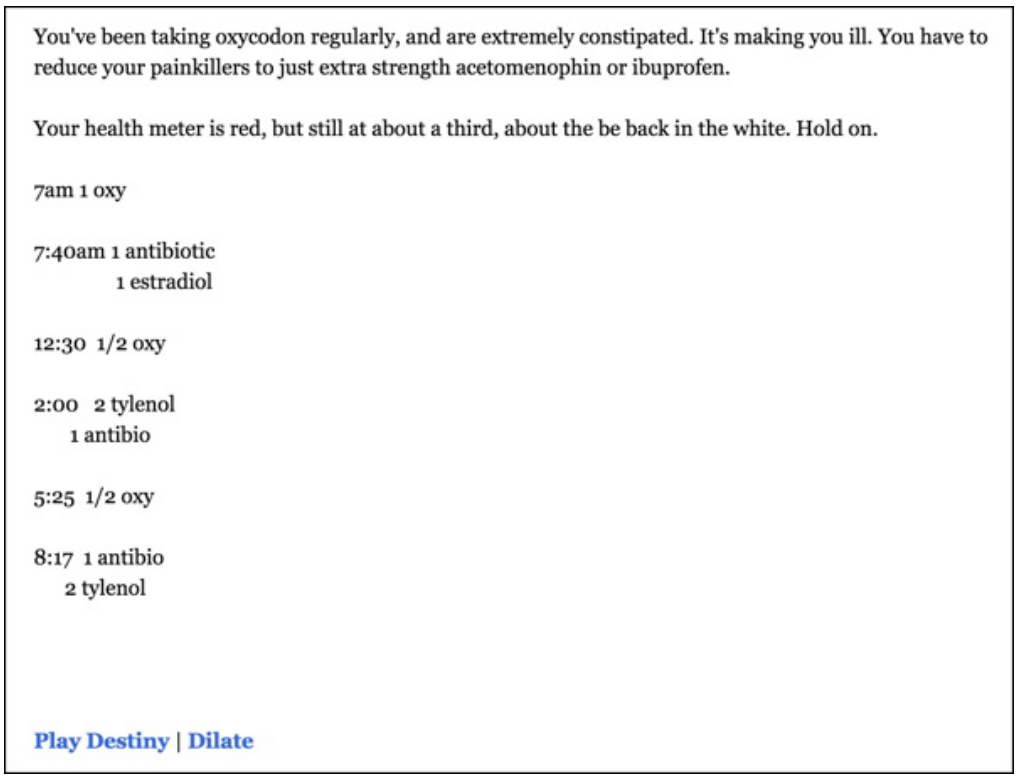
Transreal aesthetics have resonance with the genre of the "New Weird," which blends magic and science fiction with facts to reveal, in some cases, the horror of the everyday. In the case of *Dilating Destiny*, that horror is the ongoing deaths of black and trans people, which continues at the time of this writing as large protests over the killing of in Charlotte, North Carolina are being met with militarized police violence. Keith Lamont Scott, a disabled man and father, was shot and killed by police, and his family says he was simply reading a book in his car at the time (Norton 2016).

Dilating Destiny uses a transreal aesthetic to add to the list of bodies I've inhabited not just male and female, but also Awoken and warlock. While alien characters are common to science fiction and video games, they are rarely the subject of transgender autobiographical stories. In doing so I continue the thinking of theorists such as Sandy Stone who claims, "we can seize upon the textual violence inscribed in the transsexual body and turn it into a reconstructive force" by rejecting the gender assigned to me at birth, a kind of violence committed through enforcing language onto my body, and reimagining other possibilities through new languages (2006, 230). Stone's analysis, though, is more than textual. She states that transsexual political struggle is a "circumstance in which a minority discourse comes to ground in the physical," describing the transsexual body as "the battlefield" and "a tactile politics of reproduction" (2006, 230). In doing so, Stone demonstrates that transgender studies can be a mode of analysis using embodied experience as a ground for knowledge beyond textuality, and as such, provides a ground for affective, autobiographical *media analysis*

through one's body, which has resonance with éciture feminine, literature of intoxication, and Sobchack's continuum between the body and media.

Similarly to the way that *Becoming Dragon* engages with and critiques the platform of *Second Life*, *Dilating Destiny* is a meditation on contemporary video games. My previous twine game "A Survivor is Reborn" also engaged with the 2013 playstation remake of *Tomb Raider* to critique the way that it commodified depictions of sexual violence against women, portraying Lara Croft's death as a sexualized scene over and over again. "A Survivor is Reborn" told a personal narrative of experience with sexual violence and the slippage of reality that the character in the game feels upon seeing #SURVIVOR billboards for the game around Los Angeles, as well as while playing the game. "A Survivor is Reborn" is no longer available online, like the game "A Synchronous Ritual" which I discuss later in the article. Online games made by trans women are often deeply personal, ephemeral and temporary. *Dilating Destiny* continues the exploration on the lack of boundaries between realities that some game players may feel, as well as the differences in audience reception of games based on their genders.

Dilating Destiny tells the story of a character who is taking large amounts of pain killers, just days after receiving Gender Reassignment Surgery. The following screen in the game—which one can see as a single poem if the game is considered a series of poems—was the initial inspiration for the project:



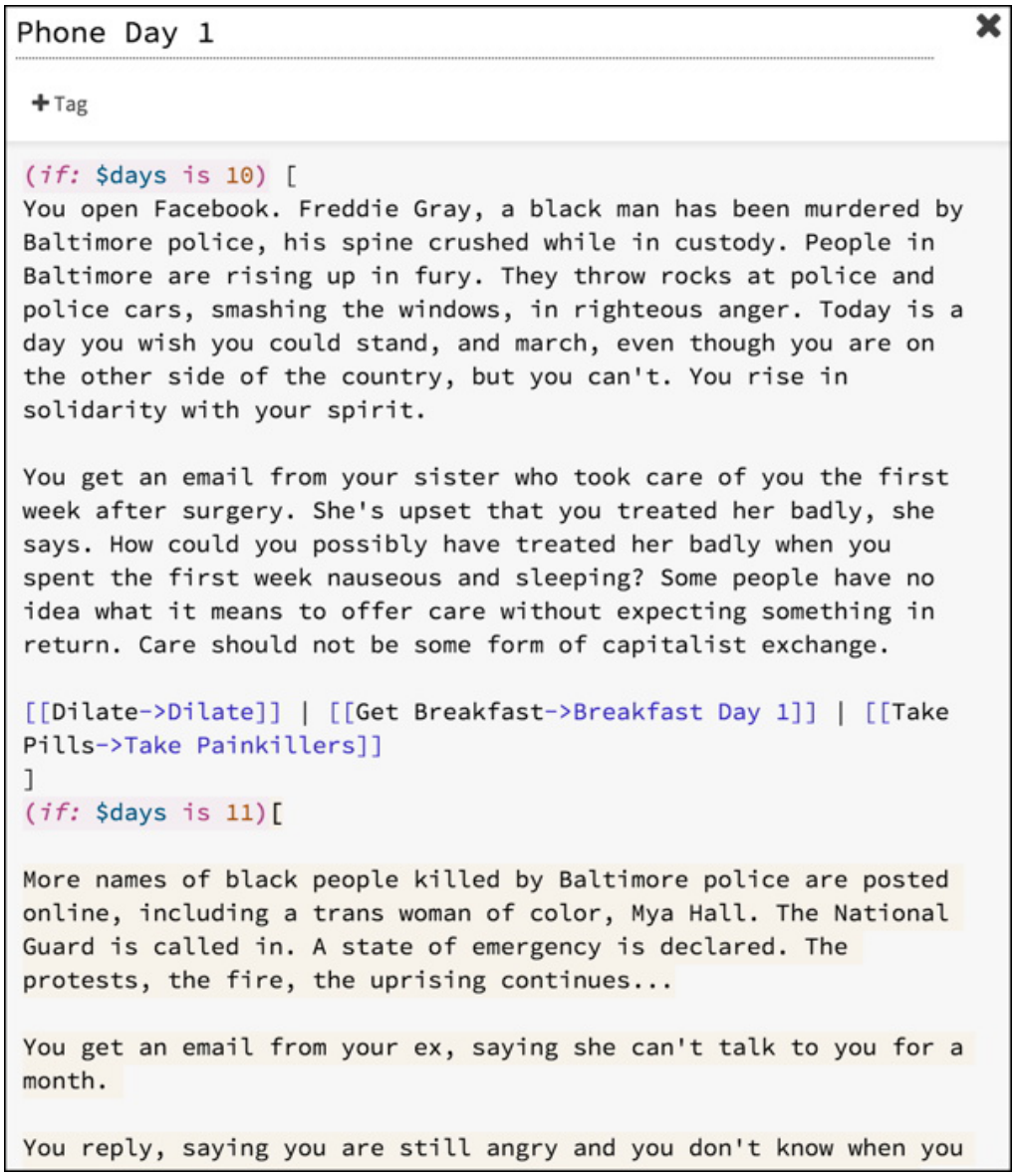
Inspiration for the project, Dilating Destiny, gameplay screen shot.

As I looked at my medication journal, I recalled a previous poem I had written for my performance *Becoming Transreal,* a performance which extended *Becoming Dragon* into a science fiction narrative of biohacking and pharmaceutical piracy. The one line poem in *Becoming Transreal* is this:

> "prometrium 100mg." (2012, 63)

With this poem I sought to convey that the drug prometrium, and the experience of it, was in itself a poem with unspeakable dimensions. The poem consisting of a list of drugs, above, spoke to me of other lesbian poets such as Gertrude Stein who

also used repetition and lists in her work. Yet here I invite the reader to consider the depth of meaning of each individual medication.



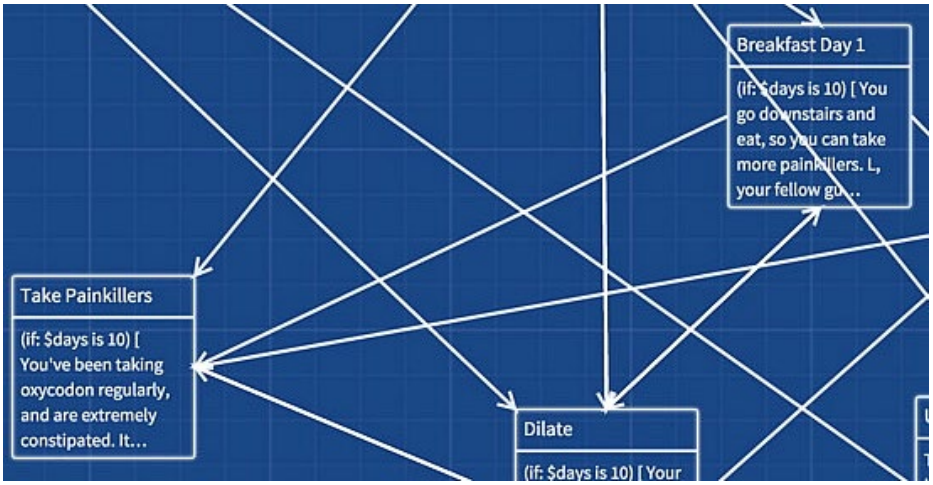
Dilating Destiny, Twine Code editor interface

Another main inspiration for *Dilating Destiny* is the artistic movement of trans women's video games, many of which are made in Twine. Twine is a free, open source, easy to use authoring software that makes game creation accessible to a broad spectrum of authors. Merritt Kopas' game "A Synchronous Ritual" allows the player to virtually take estradiol, a pill form of estrogen, if they wait for the proper time to take it, the time when the author of the game presumably has to take it. Thus, a ritual is enacted where estrogen is being virtually consumed synchronously with her actual consumption of it. I understand this game bringing the player into a small part of the experience of being a trans person, as well as creating an imaginary community of support for Kopas, which in a world with so much transmisogyny, is an important gesture, even if only imagined. The game is no longer available online. Twine allows authors to experiment with the form of videogames, expanding the kinds of interaction beyond the usual mechanics and expectations of entertainment to create digital storytelling experiments in which a primary game mechanic might be to take a pill, as it is in Kopas' game and in *Dilating Destiny*.

Game creation as an act of solidarity

Kopas' game was one of the inspirations for *Dilating Destiny*. Kopas released a call on social media for game developers to contribute to a bundle of games called “Devs with Baltimore" which could be downloaded by people who made a donation. Kopas had previously organized the “Devs with Ferguson Bundle” by asking independent game developers to contribute works into a downloadable bundle. The “Devs with Ferguson Bundle” raised $11,761.96 for the Ferguson Public Library in just a few days, following the Ferguson uprising in late 2014. When I saw her call for a similar bundle to support the Baltimore uprising, with all proceeds going to the Baltimore lgebra Project, a coalition member of Baltimore United for Change, "a coalition of concerned citizens and organizations working for justice in Baltimore city" (Baltimore).

I contacted her and told her that I wanted to create a game for the bundle. What resulted from that was *Dilating Destiny*, which describes my recovery process as I followed the events of Baltimore online. It considers how solidarity doesn’t always mean standing together, for people who cannot stand. It points out the ableism of political language that often goes unquestioned and tells the story of a character who wants to act in solidarity with Baltimore but is physically unable to get out of bed. *Dilating Destiny* continues the development of my thinking of the importance for solidarity between disability justice and gender justice movements, expanding the ways solidarity is thought to be embodied (cárdenas 2014; e-fagia 2014; Digital Humanities 2012).



Dilating Destiny, Twine story editor interface

The Baltimore uprising occurred after Freddie Gray was murdered by Baltimore police, having his spine crushed while in police custody (BBC). In the days that followed, social media posts pointed out that a black trans woman, Mya Hall, had also been murdered by federal agents near Baltimore. While some would separate her murder from her gender, I see the violence of the prison industrial complex as co-constitutive with gendered and racialized violence against trans people, as trans theorists such as Dean Spade and Che Gossett have argued (Smith, Stanley). *Dilating Destiny* brings Mya Hall’s name into the story of Baltimore in an effort to challenge the persistent invisibility of the murders of transgender women. To date, while social movements have successfully demanded numerous investigations into the cause of Freddie Hall’s death, the city has dropped all charges against the officers involved (Linderman, 2016). I have not found evidence of similar demands for investigations into Hall's death, which follows the trend of trans women being murdered and no investigations being made into their deaths (Rivas, 2015). In an essay titled "They Were Our Sisters: Feminists Should Not Abandon Mya Hall or Miriam Carey," Katherine Cross states,

> "When we talk about the oft-unmourned women of color slain by police, we would do well to recognize that *trans* women of color are very often the most forgotten of that already marginalized group."

Cross makes an important addition to the dialog about the focus on black male murder victims that inspired the #SayHerName hashtag, extending that concern to trans women as well as black women (Khaleeli 2016). The deep sadness and rage I feel about both of these murders challenge any attempt at a realistic rendering, leading me to try to address them through a trans of color poetics which shifts through multiple layers of affect and media.

Dilating Destiny describes a transreal narrative , slipping between the language and story of the online massively multiplayer game *Destiny* and the everyday experience of a transgender woman.In *Crack Wars*, philosopher Avital Ronell writes,

> "You understood so very little about the chemical prosthesis which was the real, insubstantial vehicle constituting the virtual... The age of the chemical prosthesis had already begun" (70).

She brilliantly links the condition of the body and mind as altered by chemical substances to the space of possibility outside of the real, not just the virtual as in the digital, but also the realm of fantasy. Ronell describes the philosophical challenge she is taking :

> "To gain access to the question of 'Being-on-drugs' we have had to go the way of literature... Drugs resist conceptual arrest" (51).

Focusing on Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Ronell calls on a broad range of theorists including Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud, and the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, among others, to get a deeper glimpse of the implications of addiction and drugs in order to understand *being-on-drugs*. Similarly, *Dilating Destiny* also considers the implications of being, and writing, while heavily medicated on painkillers, expanding commonly held assumptions about the meaning of transgender experience. While people often assume that transgender art, literature and theory is limited to concerns about gender norms, *Dilating Destiny* expands the discussion by probing the limits of agency while one is affected by pharmaceuticals and the range of possible transformations that a body can undergo. *Dilating Destiny* questions the limits of solidarity and the forms solidarity can take in a form that blends genres of autobiography and science fiction. The game considers the experience of the trans body as one that exceeds reason through the experience of pharmaceutical drugs and which exceeds the options for gendered embodiment presented to us in interactive media such as video games. While the character Roja is described as female, my depiction of playing her as my avatar expands her binary gender to one that is transsexual. While *Destiny*'s designers lack the imagination to give alien races new unimagined genders, the character's performance of Roja in *Dilating Destiny* imagines a new gender in the form of a transreal trans woman, whose body is non-binary in its moment of healing, still bleeding. Roja's consciousness is defined by the blurring of realities caused by drugs, and as such she is part alien guardian of interplanetary space and part human woman on earth in passionate solidarity with those who would be guardians of black lives.

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Notes

1. While I imagine that an international audience may be pleased to read more than one language, the usage of French here may need some qualification for non-French speakers. One reason I use this term is to refer to Cixous' concept of *ecriture feminine*, which may be translated as female writing or feminine writing, but neither translation encapsulates the rich meaning described by Cixous. Further, in the case of Salah, her work engages deeply with the politics of translation, as she is writing in a francophone, or French speaking, context in Canada. Trans studies scholar Vivianne Namaste describes in her book *Invisible Lives* the ways that limiting scholarship to English has the potential effect of marginalizing those who do not speak English. In her context, Montreal, many francophone people do not have the financial privilege of accessing English language education. [return to page 1]

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Cruising celebrity: James Franco's queer stardom, performance art, and *Interior. Leather Bar.*

by David Church



Capt. Edelson offers Steve Burns the opportunity to "disappear" into the gay SM underworld for a promotion.



James Franco holds court on the sidelines of Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (2010), in the 2012 documentary of the same name.



"How'd you like to disappear?" the fatherly Capt. Edelson (Paul Sorvino) asks aspiring young cop Steve Burns (Al Pacino) when offering him the undercover murder assignment that forms the center of William Friedkin's controversial film *Cruising* (1980). Chosen due to his physical resemblance to the victims of a serial killer haunting New York's gay leather scene, Burns soon descends into a queer underworld of SM fetishism, pornography, and recreational sex.

A generation later, the documentary *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* (Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupre, 2012) captures a discussion occurring among the spectators of the famed performance artist's eponymous retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art (March 14–May 31, 2010). A handsome, thirty-something man stands among the other museum attendees, casually chatting and watching from the wings as Abramović performs in the center of the large gallery space. Attempting to explain the difference between "performance art" and "acting," the young man suggests (with considerable oversimplification) that the only similarity between performance art and traditional stage/screen acting is the physical presence of other viewers during the performance itself. "Are you an actor?" an older museum patron replies—unaware that the younger man is, in fact, movie star James Franco, who responds affirmatively with an amused smirk. In the presence of Abramović's nearby performance, the white male Hollywood celebrity has himself "disappeared," much to his apparent delight.

Franco's star image over the past decade has hinged upon not only his reputation as a creative polymath and career student, but also on his thematic interest in both queerness and performance art. These creative threads unite in his quasi-documentary metafilm *Interior. Leather Bar.* (2013)—a behind-the-scenes riff on attempting to recreate sexually explicit "lost" footage cut from *Cruising*'s gay SM club scenes—which he conceived and co-directed with filmmaker Travis Mathews. Franco's initial interest in revisiting *Cruising* via a short gallery project featuring unsimulated sex led him to Mathews, whose independent feature *I Want Your Love* (2012) profiled in sexually explicit detail the personal relationships of a gay performance artist. Meanwhile, Mathews contributed many of *Interior*'s metafilmic aspects through a loose script that allowed considerable space for on-set improvisation between the cast and crew, negotiating the limits of what they would or would do sexually on camera.[1][open endnotes in new window] Rather than a mockumentary per se (as it has sometimes been deemed), the resulting film more closely resembles a blend of what Bill Nichols terms the "reflexive" and "performative" modes of documentary: a deconstructive metacommentary on the epistemological claims of traditional documentary cinema, achieved via semi-scripted performances, on-camera discussion about the ethics of representation,



Al Pacino as Steve Burns in *Cruising* (1980); and Val Lauren as Burns/Pacino in *Interior. Leather Bar.* (2013).

and depictions of the filmmakers themselves as authoring agents.[2]

Much as *Cruising*'s Burns agrees to the undercover assignment as an aspirational shortcut from beat cop to full detective, but perhaps also to indulge his ambiguous, repressed (homo)sexuality, *Interior* depicts aspiring actor Val Lauren (playing himself) struggle with his casting in the Pacino role, worried that his (professional) identity will be compromised by similarly adopting a fictional personality that requires him to inhabit spaces where unsimulated gay sex occurs.[3] Echoing how Franco's embrace of graduate-level education and multiple creative avenues beyond acting (visual art, poetry, short fiction, screenwriting, directing, etc.) confounds conventional expectations of what a Hollywood celebrity should do, *Interior* deliberately blurs the boundaries between documentary and scripted fiction through its collaboration between a debatably "straight" movie star and an up-and-coming gay filmmaker. Hence, more than illuminating *Cruising* per se, *Interior* becomes a meditation on how actors like Franco might publicly perform beyond the bounds of their private sexual identities through embodied acts that would seemingly transcend mere "acting" and instead aspire to a higher artistic strata distanced from crass Hollywood commercialism. As Mathews notes in the film's press materials, he and Franco began by "gaug[ing] how willing [Franco] was to acknowledge his celebrity—incorporating how he's talked about in relation to gay-themed material—in the making of this film."[4]

Less generous critics have dismissed Franco's off-Hollywood extracurriculars as the vanity projects of a narcissistic dilettante[5] (and there is perhaps some truth in those claims). But I find such judgments of aesthetic value to be less compelling than asking what the twin axes of queerness and performance art might offer this fan-turned-friend of Abramović as a means of negotiating his own mainstream celebrity status. Indeed, Franco is perhaps the most famous of several white, hetero-male movie stars (also including Joaquin Phoenix and Shia LaBeouf) to have recently adopted the rhetoric of "performance art" as a method for challenging public images that, in their own eyes, seem too closely aligned with banal Hollywood cinema. In other words, *Interior* is notable as not only a reworking of a much-maligned Hollywood film with a cult following among contemporary gay men. It is also an extension of a larger cultural moment in which two different media, performance art and (Hollywood) acting—both united by a focus on the performer, but separated by their respective aesthetic strata—have converged around the figure of the celebrity.



Much as *Cruising*'s detractors denounced Friedkin as a straight director voyeuristically peering into and exoticizing a gay ghetto from a privileged outsider position,[6] Franco and his hetero-male celebrity peers could be accused of co-opting the label "performance art" to serve their own purposes. This has been accomplished in part by their tendency toward discursively reducing the very large and diverse medium of *performance art* to a particular subset of gallery-based *body art* that emerged in the 1960s-70s. Amelia Jones notes how the label "body art" was developed by critics

> "who wished to differentiate it from a conception of 'performance art' that was at once broader (in that it reached back to dada and encompassed any kind of theatricalized production on the part of a visual artist) and narrower (in that it implied that a performance must actually take place in front of an audience, most often in an explicitly theatrical, proscenium-based setting)."[7]



Two canonical, sexually provocative works of 1970s performance/body art: Vito Acconci masturbates under the gallery floors while narrating his sexual fantasies through a speaker, in *Seedbed* (1972); and Carolee Scheneemann unfurls and reads a paper scroll from within her vagina, in *Interior Scroll* (1975).

As Jones continues, many of performance/body art's biggest names of the 1960s-70s (e.g., Vito Acconci, Yves Klein, Joseph Beuys, Allan Kaprow, Chris Burden) were white, straight-identified men who inherited Abstract Expressionism's masculinist ethos of virile, normatively male genius.[8] Although performance/body art also became a space for feminist artists (e.g., Abramović, Carolee Schneemann, Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke) to interrogate gender norms, it has in more recent decades become a privileged space of expression for people of color and sexual minorities.[9] Artist Holly Hughes suggests that "Prior to 1990, few Americans outside of the big-city art ghettoes had even heard of performance art," but following right-wing attempts to defund the National Endowment for the Arts, "even people who'd never seen a show began to get a sense of what performance art is: 'queer.'"[10]

If the very label "performance art" has increasingly become associated with both gallery-based body art and queer politics, then white male Hollywood celebrities' use of that connotation to describe their entry into a different realm of performance surely retains an air of cultural appropriation. And yet, following *Cruising*'s more recent critical reappraisal, I will argue that *Interior* may also be compromised by its status as an exploratory vehicle for hetero-male anxieties, but nevertheless retains a queer complexity that cannot be simply written off as cynical cooptation. My reading therefore focuses, for better or worse, on how *Interior* functions within Franco's larger interrogation of his own celebrity—even at the risk that I also reproduce the film's own biases by marginalizing Mathews's creative role in the following discussion. After all, it is doubtful that without Franco's prominent involvement in the project—especially a project featuring unsimulated gay sex—it would have garnered as much attention, regardless of whoever actually did the heaviest lifting in the production process. As B. Ruby Rich reported from the film's Sundance premiere,

> "Only the hope of seeing Franco in an X-rated scene could explain a theater packed to the gills for a late-night screening of a one-hour experimental movie."[11]

If *Cruising*'s spurious correlation between homosexuality and serial murder has contaminated its latter-day reputation, then *Interior*. *Leather Bar*'s yoking together of performance/body art and Hollywood celebrity is another correspondence whose very speciousness reveals the political stakes of performing sexual-cum-professional identities at different moments in LGBTQ history.

Marina and the boys

Mannered eccentricity among Hollywood stars is, of course, virtually as old as the mainstream film industry itself. But when a small cadre of postmillennial movie stars began promoting a series of public stunts in the late 2000s under the imprimatur of "performance art," the media covered these activities through cross-reference to each other, and some of these stars even began publicly commenting on the artworthiness of each other's unconventional performances—thus begging the question of what this rhetorical foray into another performance



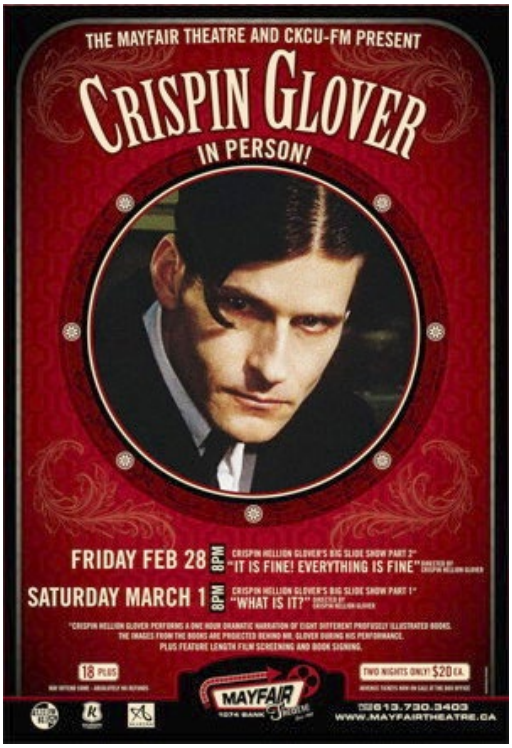


Joaquin Phoenix's 2009 interview with David Letterman, from *I'm Still Here* (2010); and VHS frame grab from Crispin Glover's aborted 1987 interview with Letterman, in which the host nearly received a platform shoe to the skull.

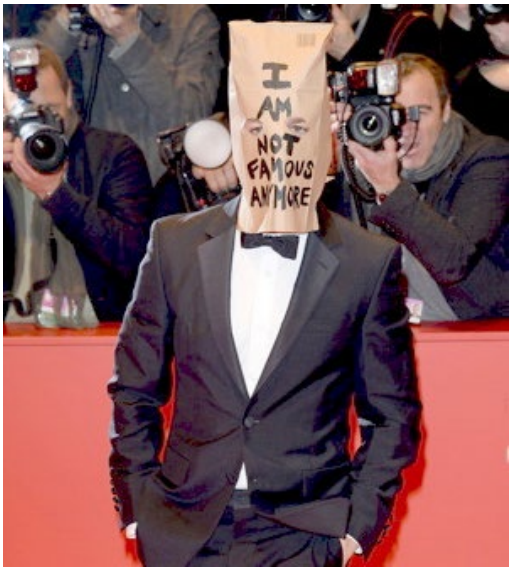
medium might offer these celebrities. Detailing and evaluating these varied efforts is well beyond the scope of this essay, but the following offers a brief précis of notable moments in this recent trend.

Although Marina Abramović's concurrent celebrity as one of performance/body art's most visible and venerated faces during these same years was a primary influence upon these movie stars (as I will elaborate shortly), it is also possible to trace a loose genealogy of eccentric-performance-as-Hollywood-rejection back to character actor Crispin Glover. While not commanding the same A-list celebrity status as the more recent crop of stars-turned-performance-artists, Glover's famous repudiation of his breakthrough role in *Back to the Future* (Robert Zemeckis, 1985)—including his refusal to appear in its sequels and his successful lawsuit against the producers over their unauthorized use of outtakes and stand-ins to replace him—set the mold for these later stars' public rejection of Hollywood blockbuster cinema. From Phoenix's (fake) "retirement" from acting in the wake of his Oscar-winning role in *Walk the Line* (James Mangold, 2005) to LaBeouf's criticism of his own participation in the *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007-) franchis eand *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Steven Spielberg, 2008),[12] the major star's well-publicized withdrawal toward more "artistic," less commercial projects owes much to Glover's lead. It is no coincidence, for example, that Phoenix's much-mocked January 2009 interview on *The Late Show with David Letterman* (featuring the bedraggled and recently "retired" star awkwardly mumbling his way through an otherwise standard promotional appearance)[13] mimicked Glover's notoriously high-kicking 1987 interview with Letterman, in which Glover was similarly (and unbeknownst to Letterman) "in character" as the protagonist from his then-unreleased independent comedy *Rubin and Ed* (Trent Harris, 1991).

But beyond the realm of gimmicky late-night interviews, Glover's more recent side career touring in support of his self-directed cult films *What Is It?* (2005)



Poster for two evenings of Crispin Glover films and performance at The Mayfield Theatre, Ottawa, Ontario, in 2014.



Shia LaBeouf's first wearing of the "I Am Not Famous Anymore" paper bag, at the Berlinale premiere of Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* (2013).

and *It is Fine. Everything is Fine!* (2007) evinces more direct affinities with performance art as traditionally understood. In her influential theory on the ontology of live performance, for instance, Peggy Phelan suggests that performance art cannot be wholly considered "somehow 'beyond' or 'outside' the art market," but its traditional focus on the ephemerality of the performer/ audience interaction marks its political "resistance to the commodity form."[14] Although we might question such claims, given the various forms of (cultural/ symbolic) capital nevertheless accrued by even those artists who don't sell copies/ records of their work, the emphasis on live performance's ephemerality as resistant to capitalist commodification persists as an ideology undergirding much of the medium. Because Glover does not circulate (piratable) screeners, his feature films, filled with "shocking" content in the 1970s midnight-movie tradition of Alejandro Jodorowsky, et al., can only be viewed with Glover present in person, as but one part of live shows that also include Q&A sessions and theatrical readings from his books.[15] By requiring that his films be viewed beside the liveness of the actor/ director's physical presence—and with his penchant for generously conversing with each night's audience—Glover's public performances thus associate liveness with a repudiation of overly mediatized blockbuster entertainments. His overtly independent films attempt to challenge the viewer's sensibilities with taboo imagery deliberately opposed to mainstream Hollywood cinema, while his onstage presence recalls his *Back to the Future* lawsuit by actively resisting the very divorcement of the actor's corporately circulated onscreen image from his lived being.

Indeed, it is notable that the three stars most often linked to performance art discourse—Phoenix, Franco, and LaBeouf—all began acting from a very young age, suggesting a difficulty in separating themselves from their media images. In the early scenes of the mockumentary *I'm Still Here* (Casey Affleck, 2010), for example, we see local news footage of the Phoenix siblings performing as children —and then cut ahead to present-day Joaquin ranting that he doesn't want to play "the character of Joaquin" anymore.[16] Moreover, both Joaquin and Casey Affleck are linked to a sort of "second-hand celebrity" status as the younger siblings of more famous brothers, River and Ben. Although Phoenix's supposed "retirement" from acting and turn toward a rap career were all an elaborate fabrication captured for *I'm Still Here*, this project intentionally used the celebrity media machine against itself, seeding lies into the gossip mill of rumor and speculation surrounding Hollywood stardom.[17] Of course, calling attention to the factual lapses between celebrities' star images and their actual selves is hardly a groundbreaking insight. Nevertheless, there is a certain pathos in watching celebrities struggle with the inescapability of their own media selves—as attested by the frequent media speculation that such antics are less a deliberate performance than symptoms of psychological meltdown in the face of fame. LaBeouf's wearing of a paper bag, reading "I Am Not Famous Anymore," over his head at the Berlinale premiere of Lars Von Trier's *Nymphomanic* (2013), is a case in point. Even Franco himself penned a *New York Times* op-ed wondering if this was "a nervous breakdown," "mere youthful recklessness," or "a piece of performance art, in which a young man in a very public profession tries to reclaim his public persona." For Franco,

> "Our rebellion against the hand that feeds us can instigate a frenzy of commentary that sets in motion a feedback loop: acting out, followed by negative publicity, followed by acting out in response to that publicity, followed by more publicity, and so on. Participating in this call and response is a kind of critique, a way to show up the media by allowing their oversize responses to essentially trivial actions to reveal the emptiness of their raison d'être."[18]

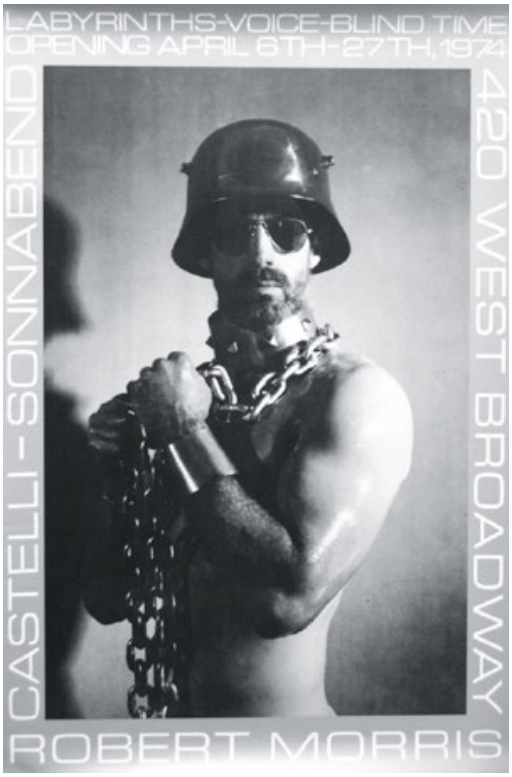
In other words, public expressions of wanting to be “not famous anymore” become, intentionally or not, fodder for still more celebrity media coverage—which is why these stars’ forays into performance art tend to be centrally concerned with interrogating their own celebrity status. After all, performers like Franco have reached the point where celebrity watchers begin wondering whether any tiny public indiscretion might be read as an unannounced attempt at “performance art.”[19]

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Conceptual artist Robert Morris's controversial exhibition advertisement, as originally printed in a 1974 issue of *Artforum*. Morris's hypermasculine adoption of SM gear by a heterosexual artist used queer imagery to both question and reinforce gender norms.

Perhaps the most common thread in these stars' adoption of performance/body art rhetoric is the desire to "inauthenticate" a public persona already constructed around fame in one cultural form. For Franco, this largely consists of spreading his celebrity image across a variety of artistic media, both culturally "low" and "high," beyond cinema alone: from his 2009-12 stint playing the murderous performance artist "Franco" on *General Hospital* (which coincided with a real-life show of the fictional Franco's work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles), to his lackadaisical co-hosting of the 2011 Academy Awards, to a variety of smaller (and often more sexually provocative) art projects themed around "James Franco."[20] [open notes in new window] In one critic's words,

> "As Franco adds layer upon layer, wink upon wink—as he slides further along the continuum from Gyllenhaal to Warhol—his entire career is beginning to look less like an actual career than like some kind of gonzo performance piece: a high-concept parody of cultural ambition."[21]

For another,

> "Franco's recent image seems to subsume all media and cultural strata…in a perpetual deconstruction of the very possibility of 'high' or 'authentic' performance. […] [N]ow it is the knowing wink of the meta-celebrity that bears the stamp of quality, rather than the improvisational effects of an actor who is 'living the part.'"[22]

On some level, a move into other performance media may represent a narcissistic bid for more acclaim—particularly if it must be earned against stronger art-critical opposition—but it may also serve as an earnest attempt to reshape one's self-identity without sacrificing the idea of oneself as a creative professional. Furthermore, such moves resonate with a longer tradition of male body artists who may "confuse and complicate masculinity" by masochistically opening their displayed bodies to the art-critical gaze.[23] In this case, this may be an especially masochistic move if critics are already predisposed toward skeptical dismissal of these Hollywood actors' artistic motivations—but the recuperation of masculine identity is also all the easier to recover for white male celebrities with such preexisting social privilege.

For LaBeouf, for instance, the supposed inability to reconcile Hollywood stardom and creative originality found expression in his series of plagiarized artworks and equally plagiarized apologies.[24] One especially notable example was his plagiarism of Abramović's famous performance piece *Rhythm 0* (1974). In the Abramović original, she presented an audience with 72 objects, from the innocuous to the potentially deadly (e.g., a loaded gun), and invited them to use them on her in whatever way they saw fit over the course of six hours.



A variety of both harmless and dangerous implements on display during Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) performance.



A variety of implements on display (including Hollywood-themed objects) during Shia LaBeouf's *#IAMSORRY* (2014) performance, plagiarizing Abramović.



Performance art celebrity Abramović sitting with gallery visitors for *The Artist is Present*...



...and Hollywood celebrity LaBeouf sitting with gallery visitors for *#IAMSORRY*.

In the multi-day LaBeouf version, *#IAMSORRY* (2014), gallery visitors were likewise presented with a variety of objects (including a Transformers toy and an Indiana Jones bullwhip) they could use as they wished on the bag-headed LaBeouf. Created with LaBeouf's art-world collaborators Nastja Säde Rönkkö and Luke Turner, the piece also recalled Abramović's *The Artist is Present* (2010) in requiring each patron to sit individually before the silent performer during their encounter with the famous artist.[25] His piece thereby literalized not only the public's potentially sadistic curiosity in spectacles of celebrity self-destruction, but also Hollywood's reliance on cultural derivativeness (to say nothing of the art world's own post-postmodern derivativeness, as seen, for example, in the "metamodernist manifesto" that inspired LaBeouf's performance work).[26]



Abramović's place as the central touchstone for both LaBeouf's and Franco's interest in performance/body art is perhaps little surprise, given her own celebrity within her respective cultural sphere. Between her Guggenheim show *Seven Easy Pieces* (November 9-15, 2005), in which she re-performed a series of seminal 1960s-70s pieces (including one of her own) by famed performance artists, and her own career retrospective *The Artist is Present* five years later, Abramović became the public embodiment of "performance art" as a whole (despite her body works still representing only a subset of a much more diverse artistic field). In *Seven Easy Pieces*, for instance, the physicality of her body concretized the

Abramović re-performs Gina Pane's *Conditioning* (1974), channeling the body art canon, during *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005).

earlier, more ephemeral history of live performance/body art through her re-performances: by funneling the past through a single (heterosexual) person, she effectively *became* the body art canon. The behind-the-scenes documentary about *The Artist is Present*, an exhibition that also featured art students recreating her past works, further heightened her public profile.

Although Jay-Z and Lady Gaga are among the other media stars who have capitalized on Abramović's heightened celebrity through collaborations with her, none have such close associations with A-list movie stardom as Franco, who directly sought out her friendship and mentorship in 2009. (At the time of this writing, Abramović is even making a film about Franco, further suggesting their mutually beneficial relationship.) Yet, as the *New York Times* notes,

> "some performance artists and critics are accusing Ms. Abramović of cultivating something suspiciously like a cult of personality… [becoming] in danger of disappearing down the rabbit hole of her own mythology, betraying not only her own roots but also, perhaps, the true nature of performance art itself."[27]

Although this sort of backlash potentially attends all manner of artists who have reached a mature stage of critical renown, performance art's ideology of purported resistance to commodification makes the specter of "sell-out" celebdom all the more acute.

But if Abramović's blossoming celebrity has inspired some measure of critical backlash for seemingly "selling out" as performance art's biggest brand name, this reaction pales compared to the vitriol earned by Hollywood celebrities encroaching on the same aesthetic territory.The rote art-critical response writes off these movie stars' performance works as cynical put-ons by hyper-privileged individuals with neither the training nor the discipline to fully embrace *performance art* proper:

> "While experimenting with performance art might be a nice way for them to deal with their own feelings about celebrity while entertaining their fans, it's not yet worth examining as art for art's sake."[28]



Cultural appropriation of gender performance: one of James Franco's widely panned 2013 re-creations, alongside the original from Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80) series.

Of course, this criticism downplays the extent to which the art world's major classes of constitutive subcultures—from artists, dealers, and collectors to critics and museum curators—are all complicit in performing their own highly privileged, micro-celebrity statuses.[29]

Although there is no doubt that these Hollywood stars and the oft-insular world of gallery art mutually benefit from the shared publicity (much to the dismay of some artists and critics), more troublesome are the accusations of cultural appropriation attending such crossover moments between popular celebrity and elitist obfuscation.[30] From LaBeouf's unattributed copying of Abramović to Franco's widely-panned 2013 recreation of Cindy Sherman's iconic series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-80),[31] their collapse of cultural distinctions is more specific than contaminating the realm of high art with the allure of celebrity, pop culture, and mass reproduction (à la Warhol). Rather, it seems to bespeak a small group of wealthy, white, heterosexual men's cultural privilege in "colonizing" a medium that has since the 1980s-90s become associated with embodied minority self-representation. Yet, while I am not so quick to flatly reject all such works as merely "performance art" in heavy quotations, the cultural-appropriation criticism remains worth highlighting since it impinges upon Franco's use of *Cruising* in *Interior. Leather Bar.*



Although some critics have accused Franco himself of "cruising" gay culture for disingenuous reasons, his appropriation of queerness has generally received more



Two of Franco's queer-themed performances: as Harvey Milk's lover in *Milk* (2008), and as Allen Ginsberg in *Howl* (2010).

critical acceptance than his appropriation of performance/body art. Perhaps this has more to do with a film actor remaining within his chosen medium—and a medium more readily associated with crass commercialism—than venturing into the realm of high art. From his eponymous breakthrough role in the made-for-TV biopic *James Dean* (Mark Rydell, 2001), to his queerly charged bromances like *Pineapple Express* (David Gordon Green, 2008) and *This is the End* (Evan Goldberg and Seth Rogan, 2013), to his overtly gay roles in period pieces like *Milk* (Gus Van Sant, 2008), *Howl* (Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, 2010), and *The Broken Tower* (James Franco, 2011), Franco's stardom has long been tied to queer themes. Rejecting the Franco-as-dilettante criticism, Michael Bronski observes that

> "in a little over a decade he has created a larger body of work on gay male themes, and manifested a political sensibility queerer than most other performers or directors, gay or straight, working in the United States today."[32]

But, again, such praise adheres more to Franco's cinematic output than his varied efforts at poetry, visual art, and performance pieces.

In a humorously deprecating self-interview between "Gay James" and "Straight James" about his "queer public persona" and the accusations of "exoticizing of gay lifestyles," Franco posits,

> "I like to think that I'm gay in my art and straight in my life. Although, I'm also gay in my life up to the point of intercourse, and then you could say I'm straight. So I guess it depends on how you define *gay*. If it means whom you have sex with, I guess I'm straight."

He explains that he seeks to make "queer art that destabilizes engrained ways of being, art that challenges hegemonic thinking." At the same time, cultivating rampant speculation about his lived sexual identity becomes a "great shield" for protecting the truth of his actual private self from public exposure.[33] In effect, Franco capitalizes on increased LGBTQ political acceptance by highlighting the mutability of both sexuality and celebrity as epistemological barriers to reifying his "true" identity. He thus reverses the old smokescreen that closeted Hollywood stars once used in asserting a stable public heterosexuality to deflect attention away from their private lives. Jameson Fitzpatrick, for example, suggests that Franco's sincere interest in transcending gender norms—but not participating in gay sex—might qualify him as a "'heterosexual queer' by virtue of a non-normative sexual or gender expression that nevertheless fails to transcend the categories of straight and cis." Yet, Franco's outsized hetero/cis privilege as a celebrity "demonstrates an obliviousness to why anyone for whom queerness is a central and/or compulsory identification might be bothered" by queer equivocations that sexually tease his gay male audience.[34] As Jane Ward argues, "white male heterosexuality…draws on the resources of white privilege to circumvent homophobic stigma and to assign heterosexual meaning to homosexual activities,"[35] which allows Franco to safely occupy a sexual gray area in his professional (if not personal) life as a Hollywood celebrity.

Cruising and its discontents

Because *Cruising* was likewise accused of appropriating gay subcultures for voyeuristic heterosexual entertainment, teasing out the connections between Friedkin's film and *Interior. Leather Bar.* helps elucidate how Franco's film becomes an extension of his performance art about the nature of celebrity. Although *Cruising*'s tumultuous production and reception history has been detailed elsewhere,[36] a brief overview is necessary for understanding what drew









Neorealist scenes of New York City's gay SM clubs, circa 1980, in *Cruising*.



A leather-bound victim is murdered by one of several gay serial killers in *Cruising*.

Franco and Mathews to this source material. Friedkin had initially turned down the offer to adapt Gerald Walker's 1970 novel of the same name, but later signed on after transposing the story into the SM clubs that had subsequently emerged over the post-Stonewall decade. For Friedkin, then, these club scenes *were* the film—a supposition that more recent critics and fans have reinforced. Nearly all latter-day readings of *Cruising* have observed the neorealist tenor of these scenes—filmed on location in actual New York City leather bars, with extras who were members of that subculture—as documenting a bygone, pre-AIDS heyday of public sex that a younger generation of gay men did not live through.[37]

Moreover, the story that Friedkin had to remove about forty minutes of unsimulated sex from these club scenes in order to avoid an X rating (and this "lost" footage was, conspicuously, not restored for the film's 2007 theatrical and home video reissue) has only added to the scenes' notoriety—as explained in *Interior. Leather Bar.*'s opening titles. One of *Interior*'s extras for the club scene recreation, for instance, explains that he loves *Cruising* because men back then were living a "gay dream" that he himself has not been able to recapture in his own life. This cult repute has allowed the leather bar scenes to become metonymic of *Cruising* as a whole, overwhelming the police procedural narrative that once generated much of the film's initial controversy. As D. A. Miller suggests,

> "Once we move from the [SM] background to a murder mystery starring Al Pacino, we say a decisive farewell to neo-realism, and hello again to the celluloid closet, with all its strictly epistemological excitements."[38]

Although *Cruising*'s police honcho Capt. Edelson explains to Pacino's Burns that the SM milieu is "not in the mainstream of gay life," a militant group of gay protestors representing a soon-to-be-mainstream stripe of assimilationist identity politics launched the most vociferous protests against *Cruising*, whether by picketing theaters, actively disrupting the shooting, or even making bomb threats against theaters playing the film. At issue was not only the thematic linkage between gay cruising and serial killing (though David Greven astutely notes that "the potential for violence that adheres in cruising has to be at least part of its illicit thrill"[39]), but also the film's suggestion that exposure to homosexuality might breed murderous tendencies. In both the source novel and the film, Burns feels his heterosexuality compromised by his undercover exposure to the gay world; his relationship with his girlfriend Nancy (Karen Allen) suffers as a result, for example. But, whereas Walker's novel ends with Burns discovering the true killer, Friedkin's film goes further in its "strictly epistemological excitements" by suggesting that Burns may have actually *become* one of several largely indistinguishable killers stalking the leather scene. Much as we never actually see Burns sexually engaging with any of the men who cruise him while undercover (these implied moments are always elided with fade outs, etc.), the film ends without a clear resolution to the murder mystery.[40] By interchanging the same actors to play both the victims and their killer(s) from one scene to the next, and even post-dubbing a never-seen actor's voice (James Sutorius) into the killer's mouth during the murder scenes, Friedkin makes it virtually impossible for the viewer to definitively ascertain who has committed *any* of the murders.[41]



Burns follows one of the possible killers while cruising, just before the film fades out or cuts to the next scene, eliding the truth of his possible (homo)sexual consummation.



"You made me do this": The same unseen actor provides the post-dubbed voice for multiple murderers (and one murderer's father), obscuring the truth of who is really responsible for the killings.



The homophobic father brands his gay son with murderous, self-loathing impulses, in an ambiguous flashback intercut with memories of previously seen murders.



"There's a lot about me you don't know": Just before he begins his undercover assignment, Burns acts very strangely when Nancy tells him his father called.

Driven by an obsession with his long-dead, homophobic father, the killer (or at least one of them) targets gay men who resemble the killer himself, thereby compelled to externalize and kill the parts of his sexual identity that he cannot openly acknowledge. In one of the film's few early appreciations, Robin Wood argues that *Cruising* is fascinating in direct proportion to its ideological incoherence, since the multiplicity of potential killers suggests the endemic violence of internalized homophobia, as decreed by the Law of the Father in a patriarchal society.[42] But whereas *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), one of *Cruising*'s primary intertexts, offers a notoriously longwinded psychoanalytic explanation for its dead-mother-obsessed killer's aberrance, *Cruising* deliberately evades any clear answers about either the killers' or Burns' (sexual) identity.[43] For example, Burns reacts strangely when Nancy tells him that his father called, and he ambiguously whispers,

> "There's a lot about me you don't know."

Because Burns' father is never mentioned elsewhere in the film, this seemingly throwaway moment from the opening scenes only retrospectively becomes significant once we later learn more about the killer(s), casting further doubt on Burns' sexuality and sanity alike. Moreover, Burns is not the only cop who moonlights at gay clubs. We see other cops cruising for inter-male sex in these spaces, seeking erotic contact that might be described as properly *queer* in the contemporary sense of eluding fixed identity categories like "gay" or "straight." Indeed, for Guy Davidson, the cruising men's returned gaze into the camera during these scenes self-reflexively implicates both Burns and the (straight) viewer, creating moments of paranoia where the viewer is suddenly interpellated by queer desire, and thereby "suggest[ing] that the disorder of identification he is undergoing may extend outside the world of the film."[44]





Burns is cruised by both a cop and a killer in the SM clubs, their directly desirous gazes hailing both the character and viewer alike.

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Subliminal image of the demon Pazuzu flashed in *The Exorcist* (1973); and subliminal image of anal intercourse flashed during one of *Cruising*'s murders.

Unsurprisingly, "contagion" is the key metaphor that latter-day critics have used in discussing this ambiguous treatment of sexuality and identity, since the impending catastrophe of AIDS lends *Cruising*'s hedonistic, pre-AIDS sex club scenes a retrospective poignancy. Indeed, the metaphor of contagion also inspired the film's controversy over the "contagious" media effects of cinematic violence against gays.[45] [open notes in new window] Bill Krohn argues that the film's almost supernatural logic of contagious violence more closely resembles that of a demonic possession film like Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973) than a noir narrative. This parallel is emphasized by the similar use of a post-dubbed voice emitting from multiple killers' mouths (a là Mercedes McCambridge's voice work for the possessed Reagan) and the subliminal shots of pornographic anal penetration flashed during the murder scenes (like *The Exorcist*'s flashes of a demonic face). And much as *The Exorcist* was rumored to be a cursed film—evangelist Billy Graham even claimed that a demonic force lived within the celluloid reels themselves(!)—a similarly supernatural logic undergirded the denunciation of *Cruising* for its supposed capacity to inspire real-world violence against gay men. [46]

The hypermasculine "clone" look dominating the SM clubs may help explain and accentuate the visual interchangeability of *Cruising*'s killers and victims, but it was precisely this apparent inability to tell "evil," murderous gays from honest citizens that caused so much initial controversy. If even a "straight" cop like Burns could seemingly "turn" gay/murderous through contamination by a gay subculture, then how might straight viewers respond to such images circa 1980, when media representations of gay people were otherwise rare or very stereotypical? In the protesters' eyes, the film's derogatory depiction of gays was liable to incite homophobic violence,[47] although Miller opines that the sheer eroticism of the film's leather bar scenes were "much more likely to have sent closeted gays running to the clubs to confirm [their] verisimilitude."[48]



Supernatural contamination between cinema and real life: one of Friedkin's extras in *The Exorcist*, Paul Bateson (right), later confessed to at least one of the late-1970s murders of gay men that would inspire Friedkin to direct *Cruising*.



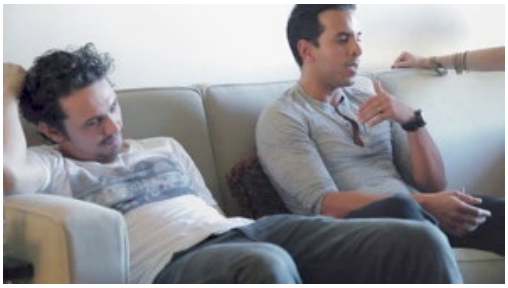
The clone look makes possible killers and victims, "bad" gays and "good" gays, indistinguishable from each other in *Cruising*.

In any case, the film's latter-day reclamation as a cult object among younger gay men surely hinges on the fact that gay visibility in the media has since become de rigueur, with *Cruising*'s depictions now carrying far less capacity to "misrepresent" gay men to ignorant straight viewers. Some of *Cruising*'s early detractors may have accused the clone look of commodifying an oppressed subculture,[49] but in today's *homonormative* political climate (in which many gays adopt an assimilationist project modeled upon traditionally heteronormative

prerogatives like monogamy, the nuclear family, and overall bourgeois privatization), such signifiers have become nostalgically tantalizing as cinematic time-capsule fodder. Indeed, for Greven, the original backlash against *Cruising* represented the death of New Hollywood itself: whereas the financial disaster of *Heaven's Gate* (Michael Cimino, 1980) may have become a production-side cautionary tale about overspending auteurs, the same year's *Cruising* controversy saw popular reception turning against New Hollywood's ambiguous protagonists in the name of aesthetically simpler films that might be more easily legible through a facile form of identity politics that continues to this day.[50]

Interior. Leather Bar.

From *Interior*'s very first vérité scene, its creators[51] express their interest in pushing back against the latter-day inheritors of assimilationist identity politics which damned *Cruising* and have since evolved into the post-AIDS push toward same-sex marriage. Casually conversing with the other filmmakers during preproduction, James recalls reading Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal* during his graduate coursework at Yale. Lending his project a theoretical impetus, he roughly paraphrases Warner's argument that the gay marriage debate is "normalizing a queer lifestyle that is incredibly valuable." Travis concurs that Warner's ideas will "help to inform [creative] choices" because homonormative politics are "erasing the radicalness and the queerness" of the subcultural world so vividly portrayed in *Cruising*. For Warner, mainstream gay/lesbian identity politics has marginalized more radically queer lifeways (including cultures of public sex) through its privatizing embrace of monogamy and traditional family forms.[52] Small wonder, then, that the latter-day "documentary" value of *Cruising*'s SM club scenes would make them such an appropriate topic for a quasi-documentary project about mining the past for sources of creative-cum-sexual expression. Yet, by acknowledging that they lack the resources to actually recreate the forty minutes of missing *Cruising* footage and must therefore use that mythical footage as a jumping-off point for a reflexive/ performative documentary about the independent filmmaking process, Franco and Mathews also implicitly acknowledge that nostalgia alone cannot will a bygone queer past into existence.



James explains the inspiration from Michael Warner, while Val expresses his hesitation about the project, during the opening preproduction scene in *Interior. Leather Bar.*

If Robin Wood once suggested that *Cruising*'s ideological incoherence could be resolved with a clearer commitment to "gay liberation,"[53] then *Interior*'s own structural incoherence as a vertiginous blend of documentary style and scripted fiction refuses the sort of easy categorization amenable to politically assimilationist arguments about respectably "stable" gay identity. In other words, the epistemological barriers that *Cruising* erects around the "truth" of Burns' awakening sexuality and/or the killers' identity becomes paralleled in *Interior*'s epistemological barriers over whether we are watching "reality" or fiction at any

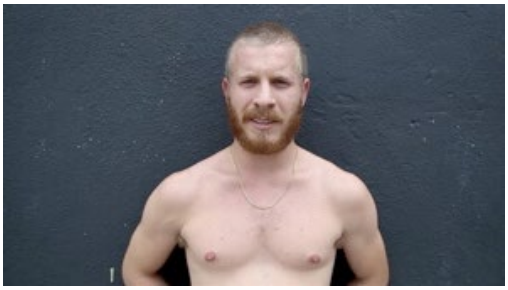
given moment. Although focused on the process of filming unsimulated inter-male sex, *Interior*'s "play of boundaries" as a (quasi-)reflexive/ performative documentary thus strives to be less a "gay film" than what Mathews dubs a "queer [film] in subject and form."[54] As we learn, nearly everyone cast for the recreated *Cruising* scenes (including Val, one of James's longtime friends and acting colleagues) is unsure what Travis and James's film is meant to become. Many actors simply responded to a cryptic casting call about a "Gay bar scene / James Franco project."

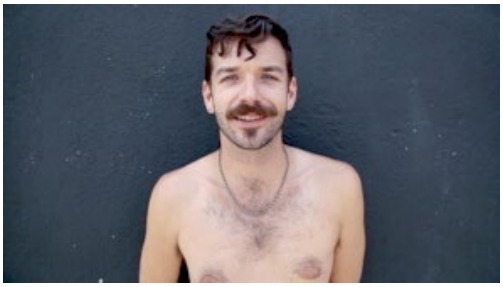
As such, *Interior* is more about documenting the semi-scripted *process* than the resulting re-creation (the latter of which only comprises a few minutes of film-within-the-film at *Interior*'s conclusion). The very fact that Franco and Mathews did not know what exactly Friedkin's excised *Cruising* footage contained (beyond unsimulated gay sex)[55] gives them considerable leeway in reinterpreting the source film—even as this lack of a clear historical blueprint ultimately makes *Interior* less about *Cruising* than about Val's (and James's) faith in the artistic process. *Interior*'s central conflict thus becomes Val's homophobic paranoia over the potential damage done to his career by playing the one-time Pacino character in his famous friend's project—echoing Burns' own paranoia over what his undercover persona will do to his lived identity. But whereas *Cruising* largely depicts the "contagion" of queerness as horrific possession, *Interior* reclaims its source material's contagious queerness as perversely desirable (if only for James and his gay extras).





This revisionist approach comes across most forcefully in early scenes featuring the on-set extras conversing about the project's relationship to *Cruising*. For instance, Travis asks a series of extras to "cruise the camera" as test footage for later shooting the leather bar scenes. Framed in (medium) close-up while standing against an outdoor wall, each man erotically gazes into the camera and also says something about what attracted him to the project. In addition to the aforementioned man who loves *Cruising*'s bygone "gay dream," others want to use *Interior* to explore something about sexuality that they are afraid of; to be in an "out-of-the-box" project compared to the blandness of contemporary Hollywood productions; or even to hopefully "make out with Franco." Although these casting moments may be self-serving attempts to play to Franco's queerly inclined modus operandi and thereby earn more screen time, those comments that Mathews selects to include in the finished film carry particular relevance. Resembling the film's own thesis statement, these responses neatly encapsulate *Interior*'s multiple threads: nostalgia, "taboo" sex, creative nonconformity, and the erotics of stardom. Importantly, they also actively give voice to the gay men whose onscreen eroticism will recreate some of *Cruising*'s most notorious scenes. As in the original film, these directly returned gazes seduce *Interior*'s viewer in a desirous exchange of vision, but with the added effect of emphasizing that these particular extras are not just indistinguishable clones of one another.





Interior's various extras "cruise" the camera for Travis, but unlike *Cruising*'s original extras, their motivations for participating in the project are literally given voice onscreen.

These "looks back"[56] are, in this sense, not only a physical alignment of gazes but also a temporal "looking back" at *Cruising*, a retrospective reassessment of the film's continuing relevance for a latter-day gay audience. *Cruising* was initially protested for not only providing a derogatory alibi for literal gay bashing, but also for its "too Hollywood" glimpse into a subset of the gay community that had previously existed in the subcultural shadows. *Cruising* can, however, now be revisited as a contra-Hollywood relic of creative bravery from a misunderstood New Hollywood auteur—thereby using the pathos of Friedkin's 1970s rise and fall to lend *Interior* itself an air of artistic distinction that resonates with the pathos of queer lifeways subsequently lost to AIDS. From today's perspective, both 1970s New Hollywood and 1970s gay sex have come to seem positively utopian (see, for example, Joseph Lovett's rose-tinted 2005 documentary *Gay Sex in the 70s*). These qualities have allowed *Cruising* to become, for some latter-day viewers, a

> "queer utopian memory, that is, a utopia that understands its time as reaching beyond some nostalgic past that perhaps never was or some future whose arrival is continuously belated."[57]

When Travis, for example, tells the assembled extras that, "unlike 2012, people aren't buried in their phones" when cruising for sex circa 1980, his emphasis on the importance of *vision* could apply as much to the pre-Grindr world of non-social-mediated hookups as to the fact of New Hollywood authorship's latter-day replacement by post-cinematic, "platform-agnostic" spectatorship.

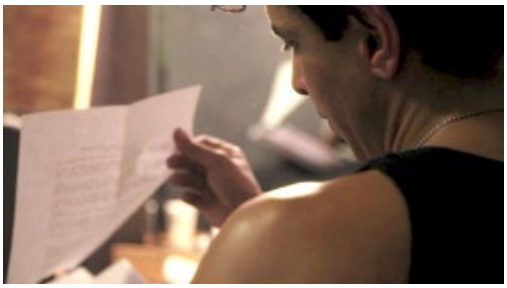
Although *Cruising*'s original leather bar extras did discuss in the gay press their motivations for effectively portraying themselves in Friedkin's film, these perspectives are elided within *Cruising*'s finished form. These extras may have misunderstood the protestors' anger about the film's linkage between homosexuality and serial murder (instead mischaracterizing the protests as a prudish reaction against depictions of gay sex), but they still saw their participation as a sex-positive attempt at self-representation for the leather community (however compromised by the exigencies of the police procedural). Meanwhile, rightly or not, *Cruising*'s detractors largely dismissed the extras' attempts at "realistic" self-representation as a narcissistic sell-out to Hollywood cooptation and an easy paycheck.[58] Here, however, the perspectives of *Interior*'s leather bar re-enactors are directly integrated into the film itself—even if their comments remain semi-scripted. In another scene, for example, the extras uphold James as a supposed "artist who's really interested in the range of human experience" (quite possibly a self-servingly scripted line), while also acknowledging that "there's going to be a whole segment of our community that's going to be waving signs and writing blog posts about 'why is this straight dude touching [*Cruising*]?'"

Indeed, this question of why it takes a pretentious "straight dude" like James to bring gay sex into the cinematic mainstream is one of the film's biggest conceptual holes, since it downplays decades of queer filmmaking to instead elevate Franco's celebrity-cum-missionary zeal for queer content. For Mathews, it was important for *Interior* to internalize an element of self-critique through reference to the original *Cruising* protests, since Franco's involvement would raise the historical specter of hetero-male Hollywood cooptation of a queer subculture.[59] This is partly a symptom of what Lucas Hilderbrand calls "retroactivism," or a politically



Val nervously interrogates Collin about his limits for "playing gay" for a role.



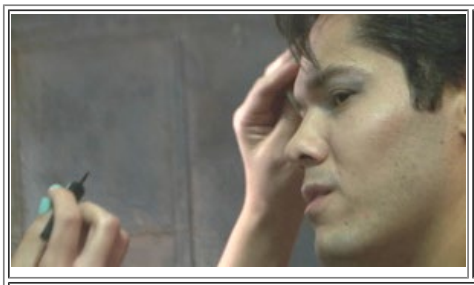


Val nervously reads aloud from the script on the margins of the set, while also revealing that this supposedly unscripted moment is in the script itself.

energizing "nostalgia…for past progressive social movements" like 1970s gay liberation and 1980s-90s queer activism.[60] But it is also a desire to overcome the blinkered perspective of identity politics through the luxury of historical hindsight. (An early draft of the script had angry protestors outside the black-box studio, picketing against Franco's directorial role, but the fact that this idea was scrapped suggests something about the overall decline of direct action among an increasingly assimilated gay population.) If the scenes that *Cruising*'s protestors once found among the most troubling have since become reclaimed as irreducibly sexy, then it makes sense that these blurred political judgments should have analogues in *Interior*'s blurred epistemological status.

Even from *Interior*'s opening scenes, the film begins troubling the notion that what we are seeing is purely behind-the-scenes documentary footage. In their first preproduction meeting, Travis tells Val that he should show some struggle with his acceptance of the project, and Val responds (with allegedly real and unscripted hesitation[61]) that he might not understand James's artistic mission but nonetheless wants to be part of it. Much like the extras lured by the promise of a "gay…James Franco project," Val is seemingly drawn to the project by his friendship with James (even if his unstated motivation may also be a paycheck). Likewise, a short scene at the film's end removes considerable doubt about *Interior*'s quasi-documentary status: Val sits against a wall in the parking lot, the script in his lap, reading aloud this very moment from the script itself ("Val sits against a wall in the parking lot. The script is in his lap. He reads to himself"). Throughout the film, we see Val nervously reading over the script as he hovers on the margins of the set where unsimulated sex is being filmed—but we also sometimes hear Mathews call "cut" from off-screen, allowing Lauren to visibly break character.

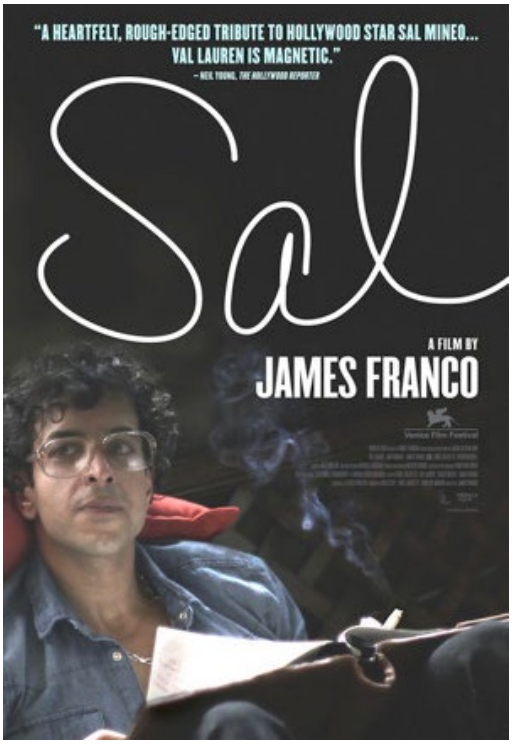
In another scene, we hear Mathews giving cues as Val and a fellow self-identified straight actor (Collin Chavez) improvise a discussion about the process of "playing gay" while the latter is being made up to appear in drag (doubling for the *Cruising* character DaVinci, a transgender hustler, as originally played by straight actor Gene Davis).





One of *Interior*'s extras is made up to resemble *Cruising*'s transgender character DaVinci, both of whom are played by straight actors.

Although Val admits he has also played gay before, including as Sal Mineo in the Franco-directed biopic *Sal* (2011), he seems almost perversely fascinated by the sexual limits that other straight actors will set for their craft. On one hand, Val's nervously intrusive questions ("Are you comfortable with physical contact with, like, other dudes? Have you kissed a guy before?") seem intended to create a homosocial camaraderie with his fellow straight actor—despite Collin's more nonchalant admission that he would engage in some homosexual contact "if it felt right" for the role. But, on the other hand, Val's paranoia over simply kissing another man seems laughable in comparison with the gay extras' earlier, panic-



Poster for James Franco's film *Sal* (2011), starring Val Lauren as gay actor Sal Mineo during his final days.





Comically outsized reactions from James and Val while watching the rehearsal of a SM scene.

free negotiation of performing unsimulated sex in what one actor hopes will be "tasteful bondage art-porn."

This humorously outsized anxiety continues in a subsequent scene of Val and James watching a rehearsal of unsimulated SM, visibly shocked by what they see (though likely exaggerating this for the camera, since they have at least presumably *seen* gay sex before). Finally confronted in person with the project's sexual explicitness, Val pulls James aside and airs his misgivings—the crisis point of his semi-scripted story arc. Although James admits that the sex "was a little shocking at first," he explains that he deliberately wants to push himself beyond his heterosexual comfort zone. "I don't like the fact that I feel brought up to think a certain way" about sexuality, he says, attributing it to Hollywood's idealization of the heterosexual couple. Furthermore, he also blames U.S. cinema's representational double standard that valorizes graphic violence but relegates (most) graphic sex to the realm of pornography. Even if conventional Hollywood narratives typically move toward ideological closure by promising the formation of the monogamous straight couple, Hollywood has also popularized the acceptability of onscreen violence over onscreen sex, as famously evinced by the imbalanced decisions rendered by the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings system (including its exclusionary use of the X rating).

James notes that *Cruising* may have figured the gay SM milieu as a descent into a "dark, evil place" due to the serial-killer plot, but that he wants to instead view such sexual practices as "beautiful and attractive." (Of course, it is easier for James to make these claims when *Interior* focuses on *Cruising*'s excised leather bar footage, thereby screening out the murders—none of which occur within the SM clubs themselves—which the original protestors found so potentially "harmful.") Val responds that sex is everywhere in media culture, but that he personally prefers restraint over the "bad taste" of what he just witnessed—though James presses him on whether the acts themselves or their means of presentation were in "bad taste."

For James, unsimulated sex "should be a storytelling tool" instead of simply being seen as "porn," a stance consistent with other creators of sexually explicit art films.[62] But Val worries aloud whether James may be ruining his own career by pursuing such a project immediately after starring in a major Disney film, *Oz the Great and Powerful* (Sam Raimi, 2013). James responds, however, that having just been in a Disney movie is "giving [*Interior*] half of its power" through the sheer juxtaposition of cultural products to which he attaches his star power. The key difference between this project and other sexually provocative queer films is, presumably, the legitimizing function that James's hetero-male celebrity can benevolently bestow upon explicit gay sex—notwithstanding the representational limits (yes to fellatio, no to anal sex) that Franco and Mathews deliberately erect. (Their own concession to avoiding "bad taste"?) Moreover, like his previous stint on *General Hospital*, James's flirtation with gay "pornography"—a form only a few steps lower than daytime soap opera in cultural ill-repute—recalls his fellow Hollywood celebrities' appeals to performance art to refute their own association with mainstream blockbuster cinema. But, here, his queer stardom lends the film's sexual explicitness an extratextual dimension that more fully illuminates his rhetorical engagement with performance artistry.

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Acting, performance documentation, and pornography



In the midst of his star's crisis, James bloviates to Val about his ambitions for bringing gay sex into the cinematic mainstream.





James lurks around the set, texting on his phone or operating a second camera, while evading Val's questions about the project's goals.

As already stated, involvement in a vaguely defined "James Franco project" attracted many of *Interior*'s extras, much as Val's friendship with James allegedly inspired the former's participation in the project's central acting role. The specter of celebrity looms over the proceedings, with James's stardom and artistic motivations for *Interior* constantly discussed by the on-set cast and crew. This is in part because James himself is conspicuously absent or hovering around the margins throughout much of the film, leaving Travis to perform most of the day-to-day direction. (In one of *Interior*'s more humorous nods to its source material, we see Val calling and recording a message for the absent James, mimicking the singsongy rhyme spoken by *Cruising*'s killer: "Who's here? You're not here. Where the fuck you at?")

Apart from several crucial conversations with Val and the crew, James is mostly seen texting on his phone, serving as a secondary camera operator, or watching the production from the wings. Even when Val directly questions him about the project's aims, James is deliberately evasive, explaining that even Pacino was nervous about playing the Burns role. Although dissolving his star status into the less visible, behind-the-scenes role of co-filmmaker, James's artistic motives remain seemingly inscrutable to even his close friends. If Val is expected to become Pacino's analogue (and, per James's instructions, to play the part as "Pacino-esque" instead of over-the-top "*SNL* Pacino"), James becomes closer to Friedkin's analogue by attempting to recreate and show the unsimulated sex scenes that Friedkin apparently could not include.

Val is thus uneasily positioned between two generations of star images—Al Pacino and James Franco—with different relationships to queer content. Whereas Pacino allegedly requested script revisions to minimize his onscreen portrayal of homosexuality,[63] [open notes in new window] Val's anxiety over "playing gay" in a role originated by his "favorite actor" markedly contrasts with James's frequent portrayal of queer characters. Val might thereby echo Pacino's reticence over the Burns role, but the vastly unequal celebrity status between aspiring actor Val and established stars like Franco and Pacino means that *Cruising*'s sublimation of its star into the image of the gay clone has different implications for a minor actor whose career might be hurt by sublimating his professional identity into roles that might somehow mischaracterize or typecast him against his (heterocentrist) strengths and limits.

"I have ego problems. I need to be worshipped and adored," says Lukas (Arnaldo Santana), an actor and soon-to-be victim of *Cruising*'s first onscreen murder, explaining to his eventual killer why he goes to SM clubs. The very act of having (queer) sex in public violates the heteronormative expectation that sexual expression be privatized within the individual home. Public sex is thus *performative* in the sense of openly enunciating desires that are otherwise expected to remain purely "personal," behind closed doors—and thereby public sex brings queer counterpublic spaces into existence.[64]



Cruising's simulated fisting scene draws parallels between public sex and performance/body art.





In one of *Cruising*'s more sex-negative moves, gay pornography is prominently present during several of the goriest murders.

The theatricality of *Cruising*'s notorious (albeit non-explicit) fisting scene, for instance, shows how public sex performance and performance/body art are not so different, since both are potentially organized around a "crowd transfixed by the scene of intimacy and display, control and abandon, ferocity and abjection [...] scenes where sex appears more sublime than narration itself" and live spectatorship is itself a form of participation.[65]

It is not difficult to see why Franco would be attracted to the leather milieu's paradoxical combination of "narcissistic fetishism"[66] and the clone look's diffusion of identity—especially via the clone's sartorial performance of working-class signifiers seemingly distanced from the typical Hollywood star's conspicuous economic wealth.[67] The theatrical nature of SM instead breeds a strange mélange of subcultural "stardom" and social anonymity that becomes reproduced in *Interior*'s on-set scenes of aspiring actors competing for professional distinction. Val's agent, for example, calls several times, pleading with his client to reconsider starring in "the Franco faggot project," reminding Val that James is a "major actor" who has far less to lose from his involvement in such controversial subject matter:

> "Anyone seeing this will consider it pornography and you will be in it."

Repeatedly appearing in his famous friend's queer-themed passion projects might heighten Val's professional visibility, but at the risk of damaging his career prospects through too close an association with homosexuality and pornography. Indeed, it bears mention that *Cruising* already prominently links homosexuality and pornography, whether through the gay sex magazines littering many of the men's apartments or a gory murder of a gay man in a peepshow booth.

Much as Friedkin/Franco enlists Al/Val to "go undercover" in the Burns role,



"We're up to our ass in this": Capt. Edelson's earnest plea to Burns, his voice and face seemingly full of queer longing.





James Franco and Val Lauren alongside the subjects of their respective biopics, James Dean and Sal Mineo, whose off-screen gay relationship was obliquely reflected in *Rebel Without a Cause*'s (1955) oft-noted queer subtext.

James's behind-the-scenes status as *Interior*'s co-filmmaker instead of star parallels *Cruising*'s paternalistic relationship between Capt. Edelson and Burns. Orchestrating the undercover investigation, Edelson clearly represents a father figure who (like James) has already achieved a mature career, substituting for the actual father with whom Burns apparently has a strained relationship. But beyond a father/son dynamic, the Edelson/Burns relationship also carries a queer charge, as exemplified when Burns eventually breaks down and confesses that he can't do his job anymore because he is (sexually) changing. As though tonally shifting from police procedural to melodrama, Friedkin cuts in to a close-up of Edelson earnestly replying, in language rife with subtext,

> "I need you. You're my partner and you can't let me down. We're up to our ass in this."

Moreover, it is not difficult to extrapolate from this father/director, actor/son relationship to the implied queerness of James and Val's relationship as refracted through their respective biopic performances as James Dean and Sal Mineo (the latter also directed by Franco), two bisexual actors whose off-screen sexual relationship was mirrored in *Rebel Without a Cause*'s (Nicholas Ray, 1955) queer subtext.

Overall, then, *Interior* finds Val caught between the movie stardom he has not yet achieved and the various performances of queerness that might alternately propel or compromise his career aspirations—a conflict rooted in his proximity to the unsimulated sex scenes that some viewers might read as "pornographic." Given its common associations with corporeal rutting instead of dramatic skill, pornography's disputed status as neither skilled *acting* nor reputable *performance* might taint "legitimate" actors like Val—after all, some of the extras have apparently been hired specifically for their willingness to perform sex on camera—hence his anxiety over James's obfuscation about *Interior*'s aims. Indeed, as Mattias Frey notes, the relative novelty of unsimulated sex within even sexually explicit art films tends to refocus the viewer/critic's attention upon the flesh-and-blood actor him/herself instead of the character. This corporeality distracts from the character's fictional milieu, even as the actor's willingness to participate in such scenes for their craft might demonstrate an artistic seriousness and commitment distinct from the realm of mainstream Hollywood moviedom. [68]

Small wonder, then, that both Shia LaBeouf and James Franco capitalized on projects featuring unsimulated sex to mark their "rebellious" distinction from Hollywood via connections to performance/body art. LaBeouf used the promotional circuit for *Nymphomaniac* (a European art film in which he appears to perform unsimulated sex—albeit with his face digitally grafted onto a body double) as his performance art stage, his antics trading on Von Trier's existing reputation as a provocateur. Likewise, Franco used his celebrity status to implicitly frame *Interior*'s gay sex scenes within the context of his widely publicized forays into performance art. Indeed, much like the only intermittent on-set appearance of James himself, the phrase "performance art" is conspicuously absent throughout *Interior* as well. Like a structuring absence, it nevertheless haunts the film via James's star persona as a performance/body art aficionado whose filmmaking motives seem deliberately ambiguous. In fact, *Interior*'s many on-set scenes of cast and crew either discussing or watching the filming of unsimulated sex resemble the documentation of a live performance event. Like the interpellation of the viewer during the gaze-heavy cruising scenes, the on-set audience (e.g., Val, James, et al.) becomes the live sex performers' medium for affective commutation between performing/viewing bodies.



As though capturing a live performance event, we watch as Travis Mathews films the unsimulated action on the set of *Interior. Leather Bar.*





"Documentary documentation" of an ephemeral performance event not to be repeated: Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971); and "theatrical documentation" of a performance staged specifically to be filmed: Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* film cycle (1994-2002).

Collapsing cultural-taste valuations between the work of Marina Abramović and Annie Sprinkle, Adair Rounthwaite usefully argues that there is "no essential difference between pornography as document and the documentation of performance art" in their affective aims. Both forms ontologically privilege a past profilmic event in which the performer's body underwent some "affective change…as guarantee that something had occurred," while also providing an affective impact upon the present viewer, albeit at a historical remove.[69] With both pornography and performance art documentation, "viewers of the past performance become performers themselves, creating a constellation between document and body in which the document, originally a recording of a past event, incites the production of new, live affects"—even if the present-day affects can never be identical to the original ones.[70]

Notable here is Abramović's recent popularization of *re-performance*, which allows space for reinterpreting past performance pieces instead of attempting to wholly recreate a "lost" original using extant documentation—an ontological impossibility, given the different historical reception contexts attending each iteration.[71] Indeed, Abramović chose to re-perform in *Seven Easy Pieces* famous works that she was "not able to see in person" and "really struck [her] deeply, but had done so only through photographs and the little documentation that one could find at the time."[72] For Abramović, then, the in-person experience of a performance piece may be vastly superior to its photographic or moving-image documentation, but the documentation of an ephemeral live event can still prove creatively generative decades later.

Theorists like Rounthwaite and Philip Auslander, however, disagree with this

> "fairly orthodox feminist position on the ontology of performance, which differentiates performance from theater on the basis that performance is not repeated and cannot be saved or reperformed."[73]

Auslander, for instance, argues that performance art documentation can be divided into two categories—*documentary* and *theatrical*. The former constitute secondary traces of a live event (e.g., Abramović's basis for *Seven Easy Pieces*), and the latter are performances

> "staged solely to be photographed or filmed and have no meaningful prior existence as autonomous events presented to audiences" (e.g., Cindy Sherman's photo series, Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* films).[74]

Furthermore, Auslander argues that performance art is not defined as such by the initial presence of an audience, since even documentary-style performance documentation primarily focuses on what an artist *did*, not how an audience *reacted*:

> "we cannot dismiss studio fabrications of one sort or another from the category of performance art because they were not performed for a physically present audience."[75]

If the performative act of documentation itself, and the past performance's ability to impact present audiences through such documentation, are more important than the presence of an original audience, then the affective impact of

encountering such documentation "may not even depend on whether the [original] event *actually happened*."[76]

Following Auslander, then, I would argue that *Interior*'s own "studio fabrication"constitutes Franco's re-performance of the "lost" *Cruising* footage, in the sense that "understanding how documentation works in relation to an original" requires "an appreciation for the specificity of authorship of each document."[77] In other words, much as Franco himself was not able to witness the now-excised vérité footage that Friedkin may or may not have actually captured back in 1980, Franco now attempts to reinterpret that footage through an awareness of present-day queer politics and his own role as authorial stand-in for Friedkin. Although relying on *Cruising*'s extant SM club scenes (i.e., Auslander's theatrical documentation) for its re-performative cues, *Interior* focuses on supposedly documenting the on-set *process* of capturing unsimulated sex (i.e., Auslander's documentary documentation) instead of simply presenting the finished "re-creation" footage itself.

It does not matter if the original *Cruising* sex scenes were performed for a live audience or even filmed by Friedkin at all. Rather, *Interior*'s "pornographic" explicitness provides the affective link between a hypothetical past and a retrospective present through the performative act of documentation itself. Like Franco, we cannot truly gain access to how the on-set extras felt or reacted during *Cruising*'s alleged performance of unsimulated sex back in 1980—especially if such scenes were primarily staged for the camera instead of for a live audience of onlookers—just as we cannot literally recreate the same affective impact of an event that may have happened over three decades ago. As Rounthwaite says,

> "[I]mages can survive through time, but bodily affects [e.g., physical arousal] created by performance cannot, even though the original affects may have been incredibly intense."[78]

Hence, Franco's re-performance of the "lost" footage can at least attempt to *approximate* what that affective impact might have been, albeit without going so far as to portray Val, James, or Travis as physically aroused during filming. James may talk a queer game about depicting gay sex as "beautiful and attractive," but his on-set bodily reactions to that sex remain nearly as guarded as Val's reticence to engage with the gay extras on camera. *Interior*'s focus on the present-day cast and crew's on-set reactions to filming unsimulated sex acknowledges the presentness of their (and our) bodily responses at a very different moment in LGBTQ history than 1980. And yet, by placing limits upon showing sexual arousal among the filmmakers, the film also points toward the limitations of its own historiographic attempt at textual reconstruction.[79]

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The police-themed "Precinct Night," as set in a cavernous, real-world sex club, in *Cruising*; and the shallow, black-box set for the recreated club scenes in *Interior. Leather Bar.*

Interior's resemblance to performance art documentation also owes much to the sheer theatricality of SM as "the most ceremonial and decorous of practices," a staged exhibition that "flouts the edict that manhood is synonymous with mastery, and submission a female fate."[80] [open notes in new window] But unlike *Cruising*'s neorealist long shots of cavernous SM clubs filled with revelers, *Interior*'s reconstructed leather bar scenes are much more claustrophobic and tightly filmed, deliberately hiding the filmmakers' reliance on a far smaller cast of extras and a nondescript, black-box studio space in place of actual lived spaces.

And although *Interior* portrays some of the same fetishized sexual activities seen in *Cruising* (e.g., boot worship), its filmmakers' willingness to only show certain types of unsimulated sex produces scenes that are paradoxically *tamer* than the sheer variety of (simulated) sexual acts portrayed in *Cruising*. *Interior*'s club scenes show unsimulated close-ups of fellatio and masturbation, for example, but the overall film does not go so far as to provide visual evidence of anal penetration, and does not even attempt to emulate *Cruising*'s audacious (but still simulated) fisting scene. Despite their ability to deliver the sort of "pornographic" footage that Friedkin was forced to cut, then, Franco and Mathews are actually quite restrained in comparison with their source material, perhaps hoping to avoid the charges of "exploitation" that Friedkin had faced back in 1980.

Indeed, the same actor, Brenden Gregory, who hopes aloud that *Interior* will become "tasteful bondage art-porn" makes this comment after filming a surprisingly tender sex scene with his real-life boyfriend, Bradley Roberge—but this sex scene also represents *Interior*'s greatest deviation from its supposed "lost" source material. As Travis explains, we have already seen these unnamed characters (who have no analogues in *Cruising*) meet at the leather bar, and they have now been taken back to an apartment (filmed on another sparse studio set) where they will have sex on a couch under the instruction of a real-life top, Master Avery (Christian Patrick), who watches from nearby. Although Brenden and Bradley initially follow Master Avery's pre-filming instructions to engage in a discipline scenario featuring light slapping, they quickly move away from these scripted commands and follow their own SM-free passions. With Master Avery's topping literally relegated to the margins instead of vividly portrayed in action, the theatricality of SM is eschewed for the more comfortable naturalism of couple sex. This scene thereby moves furthest away from *Cruising*, but in doing so, it also moves away from the public, kinky, and recreational valences that made the simulated sex in Friedkin's film so provocative, both yesterday and today.

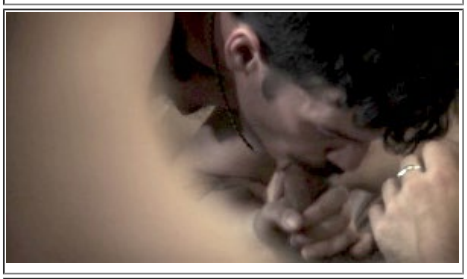


Travis and Master Avery provide pre-filming instructions for the couple's light SM action.



But Master Avery is soon relegated to the sidelines in favor of kink-free companionate sex.



	
Interior's monogamous gay couple steals the show.	They share a tender scene of explicit sex far removed from *Cruising*'s public, kinky, recreational action.

Despite James's opening gambit about *Cruising*'s depiction of a far less homonormative, pre-AIDS period before the rise of gay marriage, this pivotal scene nonetheless privileges the de-queered couple and thus undercuts *Interior*'s own political ambitions. Michael Bronski suggests that this scene perhaps "alleviates the free-floating anxiety of desire that has been circulating" because couple sex more securely grounds gay identity in specific performers whose real-life love seems "an expression of [socially] acceptable emotion."[81] Even Val, chatting with the other actors, seems to have greater respect for Brenden and Bradley after watching their sexual intimacy, explaining that he could tell they were a couple. If *Cruising* is about Burns' fear of becoming one of the anonymous SM clubbers, *Interior* is about Val overcoming his apprehensions in standing above the other actors as the (straight) Pacino stand-in, eventually instead becoming at ease with the (gay) extras whose included voices prevent them from becoming interchangeably anonymous.

Indeed, it is notable that we see James quietly leave the set during the couple's sex scene, as though deliberately testing Val by effectively cutting the lifeline that his celebrity friendship represents. But if this abandonment is meant to represent a crucial point in Val's own transformation vis-à-vis James's queer project, this unsimulated sex scene's emphasis on kink-free gay coupledom lacks the higher



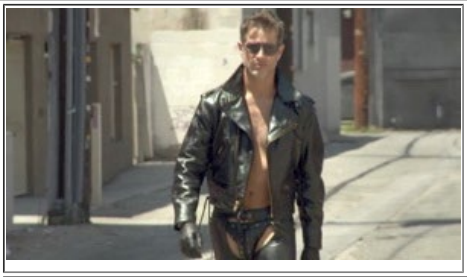


The unsimulated fellatio and masturbation in *Interior*'s leather bar sequences attempts to portray what *Cruising* could not—but heaven forbid, no butt stuff!

stakes implied by recreating *Cruising*'s more sexually casual, polymorphously perverse milieu. James may want to portray gay sex as "beautiful and attractive," but he is less successful in portraying it as hot and sexy, especially compared to the longer and more explicit tradition of all-male art-porn (such as the films of Wakefield Poole, Fred Halsted, Curt McDowell, and Joe Gage) that predated *Cruising* and goes conspicuously unmentioned here. Rather than privileging the intensity of raw, anonymous sex seen in such art-porn, and even in *Cruising* itself, the intimate, companionate couple remains *Interior*'s privileged sexual configuration. In a homonormative society, straight men like James can

> "validate the not-gay quality of their homosexual contact" by "casting queerness as that which is sincere, love-based, and, in the minds of more liberal heterosexuals—beautiful. [...] With gay identity now tethered to love and biology, these other forms of homosexual relating can be more easily taken up by straights, as they are increasingly believed to be distinct from the true meaning of gayness: monogamous same-sex love and the gay and lesbian families presumed to ultimately result from this love."[81b]

We next see Val talking to his wife on the phone as he sits behind the studio space, watching as leather-clad Master Avery walks down the alleyway during a break in filming. Val's wife jokingly asks him whether she should buy a strap-on dildo after filming concludes—an oblique reference to *Cruising*'s final scene, in which Burns' girlfriend curiously tries on his leathers while he is in the bathroom.





Master Avery struts his stuff in the back alley while Val is on the phone with his wife, in a moment recalling Nancy's assumption of Burns's leathers at the end of *Cruising*.





Burns and Val-as-Pacino give themselves over to drug-fueled dance in *Cruising* and *Interior. Leather Bar.*



As a final test, James turns back to look at Val as he quietly slinks out during the couple's sex

Perhaps unsurprisingly, anal penetration remains figured as the privileged act that would seemingly confirm one's homosexuality, which makes its absence from

scene.



"One thing's for sure, we're a sexy bunch": After watching the tender couple sex, a newly relaxed Val jokes around with the gay extras, no longer worried about losing himself among them.

Interior's visual register of unsimulated acts all the more telling as the product of an actor-filmmaker who only considers himself "gay…up to the point of intercourse." *Interior* finally ends with a blue-tinted film-within-the-film sequence featuring Val and Master Avery cruising each other in a rough re-creation of *Cruising*'s extant scene of Burns frenetically dancing with another man. Discussing *Cruising*, D. A. Miller suggests that, in the absence of more explicit confirmation about Burns' potential trysts with other men,

> "[this] moment when Steve joins the dancing offers the most satisfying 'gaying' of his character possible, all the more ingenious in that, given that he's 'the Pacino character,' we would never be allowed anything more explicit in any case."

Moreover, by *Cruising*'s ambiguous closing scene featuring Nancy dressed in Burns' leathers,

> "*Whom* he has sex with will no longer prove much; his body has been desublimated, released from the organizational grip of sexual orientation. Is he now homosexual? All that seems certain is that he's no longer *not*. He's been queered."[82]

By placing this re-performed dancing scene at *Interior*'s conclusion instead of the mid-film point where it appears in *Cruising*, Val himself is thus figured as having been finally "queered" by his on-set experience—overcoming his gay-panic anxieties and joining the fray as one of many queer performers, no longer positioning himself as the project's privileged heterosexual star. Like Franco's forays into performance art, then, the hetero-male "celebrity" (Val-as-Pacino) is meant to disappear through a proximity to explicit homosexuality that "queers" him away from the normative sex-gender privileges enjoyed by most Hollywood stars. Yet, because *Interior*'s most faithful re-creation—displayed here as the production's end result—consists of a club scene that was *already extant* in Friedkin's original film, not a "lost" fragment of X-rated footage that never reached screens, Franco and Mathews reveal a certain imaginative limit that, as in Friedkin's film, injects an ideological incoherence into their project's overarching aims. That is, much as the queer political ambitions behind Val's supposed transformation are soft-pedaled by visually privileging the homonormative couple in a scene that drastically departs from *Cruising*, the filmmakers cannot seem to reconcile *Cruising*'s most transgressive depictions of kink and public/recreational sex with their own creative desires to re-imagine Friedkin's compromised vision.

Despite their ability to play with the bounds of celebrity and performance art through a project about unsimulated sex, *Cruising*'s "lost" footage remains just that: a missing fragment from a retrospectively inaccessible time that *Interior* cannot properly approximate. Much as re-performances of famous art events cannot accurately reanimate past reception contexts, *Interior* constructs its own epistemological limits—some more intentional than others—around what Friedkin's uncut film might have included. Franco and Mathews may acknowledge that their film is not directly intended as a historiographic intervention (à la reconstruction or restoration), but their very inability to access the "lost" past inadvertently highlights the difficulty in creatively re-imagining past sexual attitudes without somehow falling back on the social valuations of our deeply homonormative present (e.g., the idealization of the gay couple). Like his other projects, then, *Interior. Leather Bar.*'s focus on different layers of stardom and performance *in process* ultimately does more to interrogate James Franco's celebrity than to illuminate queer culture on its own merits. But its own limitations as a film more interested in the *idea* of *Cruising*'s excised footage than in accurately executing this concept nevertheless reveal the sheer struggle involved in attempting to unthink homonormativity. If Franco's film ultimately

fails in its higher ambitions to aesthetically proselytize on behalf of the gay sex from which he personally excludes himself, then his failure of imagination testifies to the contra-straight potential that excavating queer pasts might, in other creative hands, still hold for challenging our present political strictures.

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Notes

[1] Travis Mathews, "Press Notes," *Interior. Leather Bar.*, accessed April 23, 2016, http://www.interiorleatherbar.com/press-notes/. [return to page 1]

2. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 56-63; Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 130-31.

3. As its point of reference, this essay uses the uncensored version of the film (available on DVD), which includes several close-up sequences of unsimulated, explicit sex. Note that softcore (non-explicit) versions may circulate via some streaming sources.

4. Mathews, "Press Notes"; and Julian Hoxter, "Gay Film Auteur Travis Mathews Talks Interior. Leather Bar.," *Filmmaker Magazine*, January 19, 2013, http://filmmakermagazine.com/63105-gay-porn-auteur-travis-matthews-talks-interior-leather-bar/.

5. A representative example: Brian Moylan, "It's Time to Bring James Franco's Reign of Half-assed Artistry to an End," *The Guardian*, September 27, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/sep/27/james-franco-saturday-night-live-hulu-celebrity-dilettante.

6. Alexander Wilson, "Friedkin's *Cruising*, Ghetto Politics, and Gay Sexuality," *Social Text*, no. 4 (1981): 101, 109.

7. Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 13.

8. Ibid., chp. 2-3.

9. David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 120; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

10. Holly Hughes and David Román, "An Introductory Conversation," in *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*, eds. Holly Hughes and David Román (New York: Grove Press, 1998), 7, 8.

11. B. Ruby Rich, "Festival Reports: Sundance," *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (2012): 67.

12. Pamela McClintock, "Shia LaBeouf Regrets Spielberg Dig, Slams Studio System: 'They Stick a Finger Up Your A--,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 15, 2012, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/shia-labeouf-abandoning-big-budget-movies-361943.

13. Michael Cieply, "Documentary? Better Call It Performance Art," *New York*

Times, September 16, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/17/movies/17affleck.html.

14. Peggy Phelan, "Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows," *Theatre Journal* 56, no. 4 (2004): 571. Also see Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), chp. 7.

15. For an appreciation of Glover's films and stage show, see Philip Brophy, "Is it Weird? Or, Actualizing Disallowed Cinema," *Lola*, no. 3 (2012): http://lolajournal.com/3/glover.html.

16. The title *I'm Still Here* also recalls the title of Todd Haynes's impressionistic Bob Dylan biopic *I'm Not There* (2007), which featured a diverse variety of actors playing some version of Dylan's public persona. Coming off his recent success in a Johnny Cash biopic, it is hard not to see these titular similarities as commenting on Phoenix's own struggle (however exaggerated for the sake of mockumentary) with his own public persona. As a part-scripted, part-documentary film, *Interior. Leather Bar.* shares some of *I'm Still Here*'s interest in celebrity gossip as epistemological wormhole, but the revelation of the Phoenix meltdown as blatant fabrication more closely aligns it with the mockumentary as fictional genre than the reflexive/performative documentary's self-interrogation of non-fiction's limits.

17. Also see Penny Spirou, "He's Still Here: Joaquin Phoenix as Transgressive Hollywood Star," *Akademisk Kvarter*, no. 10 (2015): http://www.akademiskkvarter.hum.aau.dk/pdf/vol10/12_PennySpirou_HeIsStilHere.pdf.

18. James Franco, "Why Actors Act Out," *New York Times*, February 19, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/20/opinion/james-franco-on-shia-labeoufs-recent-antics.html.

19. See, for example, when Franco's online flirtation with a 17-year-old woman in 2014 went public, which some observers speculated was a "performance" stunt: Katy Waldman, "I Hope James Franco is a Creep," *Slate.com*, April 3, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/04/03/james_franco_tried_to_pick_up_a_17_year_old_on_instagram_let_s_hope_it_wasn.html.

20. See James Franco, "A Star, a Soap, and the Meaning of Art," *Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2009, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704107104574570313372878136; Sam Anderson, "The James Franco Project," *New York*, July 25, 2010, http://nymag.com/movies/profiles/67284/; Jonah Weiner, "The Mystery of James Franco: Inside His Manic Days and Sleepless Nights," *Rolling Stone*, March 23, 2016, http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/features/the-mystery-of-james-franco-inside-his-manic-days-and-sleepless-nights-20160323; and Jerry Saltz, "In Conversation: James Franco," *Vulture*, April 18, 2016, http://www.vulture.com/2016/04/james-franco-jerry-saltz-converstaion-c-v-r.html. [return to page 2]

21. Anderson, "The James Franco Project."

22. Henry Adam Svec, "Brando versus Franco: Media Theorizing with the Stars," *Celebrity Studies* 5, no. 3 (2014): 369, 370.

23. Jones, *Body Art*, 149.

24. Laura Stampler, "A Brief History of Shia LaBeouf Copying the Work of Others," *Time*, February 10, 2014, http://time.com/6094/shia-labeouf-

plagiarism-scandal/.

25. Abigail Ann Schwarz, "On Shia LaBeouf's Metamodern Performance Art," *Notes on Metamodernism*, April 8, 2014, http://www.metamodernism.com/2014/04/08/on-shia-labeoufs-metamodern-performance-art/. See also Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, "*artnet News*'s Exclusive Interview with LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner," *artnet News*, February 11, 2016, https://news.artnet.com/people/shia-labeouf-art-interview-ronkko-turner-420677.

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27. Sarah Lyall, "For Her Next Piece, a Performance Artist Will Build an Institute," *New York Times*, October 19, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/20/arts/design/marina-abramovic-is-putting-her-name-on-a-center-in-hudson-ny.html.

28. Lily Rothman, "Explaining James Franco Explaining Shia LaBeouf: Why None of This is Art," *Time*, February 20, 2014, http://entertainment.time.com/2014/02/20/james-franco-shia-labeouf/.

29. See Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008).

30. Jessica Dawson, "Why Does the Art World Coddle James Franco?" *The Daily Beast*, April 22, 2014, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/04/22/why-does-the-art-world-coddle-james-franco.html.

31. See Roberta Smith, "Everybody is Playing Somebody Else Here," *New York Times*, April 22, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/23/arts/design/james-franco-new-film-stills-arrives-at-pace-gallery.html; Benjamin Sutton, "Why James Franco's Cindy Sherman Homage at Pace Is Not Just Bad But Offensive," *artnet News*, April 22, 2014, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/why-james-francos-cindy-sherman-homage-at-pace-is-not-just-bad-but-offensive-11107; and Kelsey Haight, "James Franco Just Tried to Appropriate the Female Experience," *Bust*, accessed April 29, 2016, http://bust.com/arts/11965-james-franco-just-tried-to-appropriate-the-female-experience.html.

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34. Jameson Fitzpatrick, "A Queer Take on James Franco's 'Straight James / Gay James,'" *Lambda Literary*, January 16, 2016, http://www.lambdaliterary.org/features/oped/01/16/a-queer-take-on-james-francos-straight-james-gay-james/.

35. Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex Between Straight White Men* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 209.

36. See Wilson, "Friedkin's *Cruising*"; Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (rev. ed.) (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); James

Kendrick, *Hollywood Bloodshed: Violence in 1980s American Cinema* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), chp. 2.

37. Guy Davidson, "'Contagious Relations': Simulation, Paranoia, and the Postmodern Condition in William Friedkin's *Cruising* and Felice Picano's *The Lure*," *GLQ* 11, no. 1 (2005): 25; D. A. Miller, "*Cruising*," *Film Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2007): 70; David Greven, *Psycho-Sexual: Male Desire in Hitchcock, De Palma, Scorsese, and Friedkin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 187, 189.

38. Miller, "*Cruising*," 73.

39. Greven, *Psycho-Sexual*, 198.

40. Davidson, "Contagious Relations," 31.

41. Greven, *Psycho-Sexual*, 193-95; Bill Krohn, "Friedkin Out," *Rouge*, no. 3 (2004): http://www.rouge.com.au/3/friedkin.html.

42. Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan…and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 42, 56, 58, 60. Both Friedkin and Pacino had earlier breakthroughs with gay-themed material; Friedkin's different species of self-hating gays in *Boys in the Band* (1970) and Pacino's desexualized gay protagonist in *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) each find notable echoes in *Cruising*.

43. For a more elaborate reading of *Cruising* in relation to *Psycho*, see Greven, *Psycho-Sexual*, chp. 6.

44. Davidson, "Contagious Relations," 43-45, 52. Quote at 52.

45. Ibid., 41-42, 49; Wood, *Hollywood*, 56; Miller, "*Cruising*," 73. [return to page 3]

46. Krohn, "Friedkin Out." In another example of this seemingly supernatural contamination between films and real life, one of Friedkin's extras in *The Exorcist,* Paul Bateson, later confessed to at least one of the late-1970s murders of gay men, including that of *Variety* film critic Addison Verrill, which would inspire Friedkin to direct *Cruising*. See Arthur Bell, "Phone Call from a Fugitive: 'I Killed Addison Verrill,'" *The Village Voice*, October 3, 1977, 1, 11.

47. Wilson, "Friedkin's *Cruising*," 99.

48. Miller, "*Cruising*," 71.

49. Wilson, "Friedkin's *Cruising*," 104-05, 109.

50. Greven, *Psycho-Sexual*, 184.

51. Because *Interior*'s cast and crew are all effectively playing some semi-scripted version of themselves, I will henceforth use first names (e.g., "Val," "James," "Travis") to denote their characterizations within the film itself, and reserve their surnames (e.g., Lauren, Franco, Mathews) for discussing their actual selves, despite the difficulty of fully parsing such distinctions in a quasi-documentary project. On this overlap between the actual cast/crew and their onscreen incarnations, see, for example, Mark Peikert's interview "Val Lauren Goes Cruising in 'Interior. Leather Bar.' at Sundance," *Backstage*, January 18, 2013, http://www.backstage.com/interview/val-lauren-goes-cruising-interior-leather-bar-sundance/.

52. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), chp. 4. Also see Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," in Warner, *Publics and*

Counterpublics (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 187-208.

53. Wood, *Hollywood*, 61.

54. Mathews, "Press Notes."

55. According to Friedkin, Franco only contacted him near the end of *Interior*'s production to ask what was truly in the forty minutes of cut footage ("William Friedkin on 'Cruising,' Franco's 'Interior. Leather Bar.,' & Mineshaft footage," YouTube, accessed April 25, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQ0MGKSd_wA).

56. Davidson, "Contagious Relations," 44.

57. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 37.

58. Wilson, "Friedkin's *Cruising*," 100-01.

59. Mathews, "Press Notes."

60. Lucas Hilderbrand, "Retroactivism," *GLQ* 12, no. 2 (2006): 307.

61. Mathews, "Press Notes."

62. Notable examples include *In the Realm of the Senses* (Nagisa Oshima, 1976), *Romance* (Catherine Breillat, 1999), *The Brown Bunny* (Vincent Gallo, 2003), *9 Songs* (Michael Winterbottom, 2004), *Anatomy of Hell* (Catherine Breillat, 2004), *Battle in Heaven* (Carlos Reygadas, 2005), *Shortbus* (John Cameron Mitchell, 2006), *Nymphomaniac* (Lars Von Trier, 2013), and *Love* (Gaspar Noé, 2015). See Linda Williams, *Screening Sex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), chp. 7; and Jon Lewis, "Real Sex: Aesthetics and Economics of Art-house Porn," *Jump Cut*, no. 51 (2009): http://ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/LewisRealsex/1.html.

63. Wilson, "Friedkin's *Cruising*," 100; Miller, "*Cruising*," 71. [return to page 4]

64. Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 193-95, 198-200.

65. Ibid., 207, 208.

66. Greven, *Psycho-Sexual*, 187.

67. Derek Nystrom, *Hard Hats, Rednecks, and Macho Men: Class in 1970s American Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 142.

68. Mattias Frey, *Extreme Cinema: The Transgressive Rhetoric of Today's Art Film Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 71-72.

69. Adair Rounthwaite, "From This Body to Yours: Porn, Affect, and Performance Art Documentation," *Camera Obscura* 26, no. 3 (2011): 63, 74. Quote at 74.

70. Ibid., 65.

71. Robert C. Morgan, "Thoughts on Re-performance, Experience, and Archivism," *PAJ* 32, no. 3 (2010): 2, 11.

72. Abramović, interviewed in Chris Thompson and Katarina Weslien, "Pure Raw: Performance, Pedagogy, and (Re)presentation," *PAJ* 28, no. 1 (2006): 39.

73. Rounthwaite, "From This Body to Yours," 74.

74. Philip Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” *PAJ* 28, no. 3 (2006): 1-2. Quote at 2.

75. Ibid., 6-7. Quote at 7.

76. Ibid., 9. Italics mine.

77. Jessica Santone, “Marina Abramović’s *Seven Easy Pieces*: Critical Documentation Strategies for Preserving Art’s History,” *Leonardo* 41, no. 2 (2008): 151.

78. Rounthwaite, “From This Body to Yours,” 75.

79. Notably, the acclaimed French film *Stranger by the Lake* (Alain Guiradie, 2013) premiered the same year as *Interior. Leather Bar*. Similarly featuring unsimulated gay sex (albeit performed using body doubles for the main actors), it also offers a revisionist take on *Cruising*’s theme of a murderer preying on cruising men. Because emerging during a far less stigma-laden period of gay history, *Stranger* could revisit this sort of narrative without receiving such intense political backlash. Indeed, whereas *Cruising* represents its titular activity as dark and subterranean, *Stranger by the Lake* presents it in a sun-drenched pastoral setting that eschews the earlier film’s linkage of homosexuality/murder as contagion, even as the later film still troubles clear boundaries for gay sexual identity among its major characters.

80. Anne McClintock, “Maid to Order: Commercial S/M and Gender Power,” in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography, and Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson (London: BFI, 2004), 237.

81. Bronski, “What’s So Queer,” 14.

81b. Ward, *Not Gay*, 197, 199.

82. Miller, “*Cruising*,” 71. Original italics.

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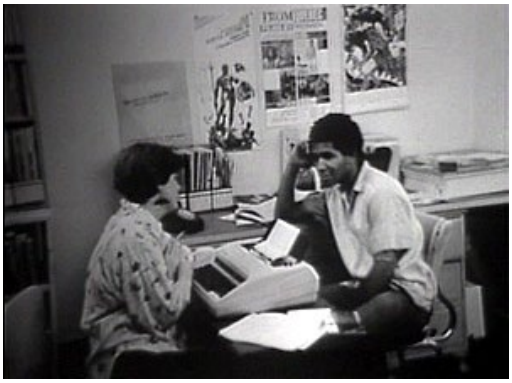
JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Binging on Greyson

by Greg Youmans

Review of the work of John Greyson and a critical study of it:

- *Impatient: John Greyson DVD Box Set* (dist. VTape, 2012);
- *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*, ed. Brenda Longfellow, Scott MacKenzie, and Thomas Waugh (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013)



In *A Moffie Called Simon* (1986), two journalists for a Canadian gay magazine discuss the challenges of doing international and intersectional solidarity work in support of gay South African anti-apartheid activist Simon Nkoli.



AIDS activist and singer-songwriter Michael Callen performs as Miss HIV in *Zero Patience* (1993).



In *BDS Bieber* (2011), Greyson draws connections between Jawaher Abu Rahmah's death at a peace rally in the West Bank, a decade of efforts by Toronto activists protesting Israeli apartheid, and Justin Bieber's upcoming

John Greyson has been creating and theorizing queer political cinema for more than three decades. His films and videos are exuberantly sex-positive, adamantly anti-censorship, playfully postmodern, and always committed to building solidarity across movements and national borders.

Beyond the power of particular films and videos, Greyson is an inspiring figure to many on the left for a number of reasons. For one, there is the breadth and integrity of his commitments. His creative work is often rooted in his Toronto-based activism:

- *A Moffie Called Simon* (1986), about an imprisoned gay South African anti-apartheid activist, stemmed from Greyson's involvement with the Simon Nkoli Anti-Apartheid Committee;
- the feature-length AIDS activist musical *Zero Patience* (1993) developed out of his involvement with AIDS Action Now!; and
- his recent internet-based videos calling for boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) against Israel are connected to his work with Queers Against Israeli Apartheid (QUAIA).[1] [open endnotes in new window]

A second source of inspiration is the way Greyson's films and videos almost always remain joyfully and defiantly queer (in the gayest and sexiest senses of the term) as they move among geopolitical sites and issues. No cause is serious, urgent, or orthodox enough to warrant the stripping of camp, cruising, and cute boys from his frame. And third, even as Greyson has gained prestige and access to the resources to make a more traditional commercial cinema, he has continued to move fluidly among genres, forms, and production values. He won the Genie for Best Motion Picture (Canada's equivalent to the Oscar) for *Lilies* (1996) and has directed episodes of major television programs such as *Queer As Folk* (2000-2005), yet he continues to make video agitprop and theory films just as he did at the start of his career in the early 1980s.

One of the most recent examples of Greyson's political commitment occurred in Egypt on August 16, 2013, two days after the Rabaa Massacre, when he and Tarek Loubani, a Canadian-Palestinian medical doctor, were arrested at a civilian protest against the July 3 military coup that had ousted President Mohamed Morsi. The two men were imprisoned for fifty days without charges, during which time an international grassroots campaign sought and eventually won their release. Greyson and Loubani had been passing through Egypt on their way to

concert in Tel Aviv.



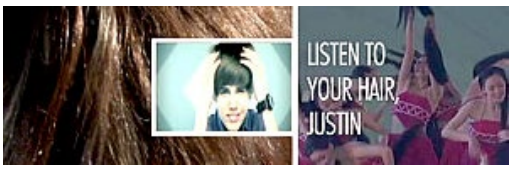
Lilies (1996): perhaps Greyson's most lavish, high-production-value film.



Hey Elton (2010) urges Elton John to do the right thing by changing the lyrics of his hit songs so they become pro-Palestinian and pro-BDS anthems.



Other artists, including Moby, are given the same treatment in *Gaza Island* (2011).



"Listen to Your Hair, Justin": *BDS Bieber* (2011).

Gaza on a humanitarian mission. Greyson has worked for the cause of Palestinian liberation for many years, sometimes through visits to the Middle East (he participated, for instance, in the second freedom flotilla to Gaza in 2011) and more often through solidarity work orchestrated from afar.

Since 2010, he has made a series of short, online-distributed videos that urge international performers such as Justin Bieber and Elton John not to play concerts in Israel and, in the case of queer and queer-associated artists like John, not to contribute to Israel's "pinkwashing" campaign, in which the state trumpets its gay-friendliness to distract attention from its human rights abuses. The videos create compelling tonal and conceptual layerings through the use of two devices that have become Greyson signatures: split screen and parodied pop songs, i.e., artists' familiar tunes with new agitprop lyrics. *BDS Bieber* (2011) is my favorite of Greyson's BDS videos, because it travels to the serious core of the issue through an especially fun and absurd path, with the star's hair getting outraged about Israel's treatment of Palestinians before the star himself does.[2]

The past few years have been a boon to fans of Greyson as well as those new to his work. In 2012, Toronto-based distributor VTape released *Impatient*, an eight-disc DVD box set containing thirty-eight of Greyson's films and videos, including four features: *Urinal* (1988), *Un©ut* (1997), *Proteus* (2003), and *Fig Trees* (2009). And in 2013, McGill-Queen's University Press published *The Perils of Pedagogy: The Works of John Greyson*, edited by Brenda Longfellow, Scott MacKenzie, and Thomas Waugh. The book, really a tome, collects twenty-six essays (a few reprints but most of them new) by premier scholars and artists, as well as more than a hundred pages of Greyson's own writings spanning his career. Both the box set and the book have received surprisingly little attention in the academic press. What follows seeks to remedy this oversight and also offer some avenues for navigating this daunting array of material, with three (overlapping) constituencies in mind: film scholar, videomaker, and pedagogue.

Film scholar

For film scholars, the box set is an amazing opportunity to screen and study the majority of Greyson's work all together. Obviously, the main scholarly use of this kind of binge-viewing is auteurist study. It's likely that many scholars have only seen one or two of Greyson's better-known works (e.g., *Zero Patience* or *Lilies*, both of which are available as stand-alone, commercially-distributed DVDs) and maybe a few shorts or other features that they've been lucky enough to catch at festivals. The works on the box set span genres, lengths, budgets, and crew size, but always showcase Greyson's distinctive voice and vision.

The first thing I noticed while binging is that Greyson has tackled the politics of public sex in his films and videos more than any other topic, even the AIDS pandemic. Piece after piece celebrates the pleasure gay men take and the community they build by cruising each other in "public" spaces such as parks, toilets, theaters, and bathhouses, and speaks out against police repression of this activity. The subject of public sex and state surveillance is found in Greyson's earliest videos, for instance the three shorts of the "Kipling Trilogy" (1984-85) and *Urinal* (1988), and continues forward into *After the Bath* (1995), *Proteus* (2003), and *Rex vs. Singh* (2008), among other works. And the police are second only to gay men in character frequency (if not character development) across Greyson's oeuvre. Crackdowns on public sex and state responses to HIV/AIDS are, of course, entwined: AIDS panic has fed the anxiety over public sex. But the latter also predates the former, and, moveover, as the character Sergei Eisenstein points out in *Urinal*, most of the sex that occurs in public restrooms takes the form of masturbation and blow jobs; in other words, it's safer sex.



The short video *Rex vs. Singh* (2008), which Greyson made in collaboration with Ali Kazimi and Richard Fung, excavates a 1915 case in Vancouver in which two Sikh men were entrapped by police and accused of sodomy.





Still photographs of Sergei Eisenstein exploring public bathrooms accompany his illustrated lecture on "Toronto's Hottest Tearooms" in *Urinal* (1988).

No doubt the fame of *Zero Patience* as an innovative work of AIDS media activism, as well as the renown of Greyson's most recent feature, the documentary opera *Fig Trees* (2009) about AIDS activists in Canada and South Africa, has done much to cement his association with AIDS activism. It can also be difficult to understand the work of a sex-positive gay male filmmaker who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as being about anything *other* than HIV/AIDS. Exploring Greyson's entire body of work, though, makes it clear that his AIDS activist films and videos are only one component of a larger, ongoing project about the politics of public sex.

A prevalent theme across Greyson's collected works is that sexuality will out, and that gay male desire in particular will find paths toward expression, if not always toward freedom. In his films and videos, male homosexuality is seldom represented in the familiar trope of desire struggling against internalized repression, or at least his visuals and narratives do not linger on such repression or eroticize it. There is secrecy, yes, because secrecy is often a necessity for survival in a homophobic world, but there aren't many stories of a man having sex with another man despite himself and then being thrown into a psychological crisis because of it. The narrative feature *Proteus* comes closest: it is the story of two convicts imprisoned together on Robben Island in the 18th century, when South Africa was a Dutch colony, and one of the men has great difficulty at first in accepting the nature of their relationship. But even in this film it is external surveillance not internal shame that sets the stakes and fuels the narrative. Within twenty minutes of plot time from their first sexual encounter, the two men are rolling around together naked on a sunny, secluded beach. In Greyson's universe, sex leads to fellowship among men, and this fellowship in turn provides strength against public opprobrium and more specifically against the incursions of the state, its courts, and its police.

A third aspect that comes to the fore when screening Greyson's films and videos en masse is the density of his conceptual layerings and juxtapositions. These are often motivated or at least invited by wordplay: the double-sense of a pun or a word's sedimented etymology. And so, *Proteus* is not only about botany and Linnaean taxonomy (the scientific name for the genus of sugarbush, South Africa's national flower, is *Protea*) but also the changeability of lived desire and recorded history, just as *Un©ut* is not only about censorship but also circumcision. In their contribution to the edited collection, Martin Zeilinger and Rosemary J. Coombe, both of whom are well versed in intellectual property law, offer a succinct justification of this play on words in *Un©ut*:

> "[A]n imaginative isomorphism between the editing of works of art and penile circumcision—a potentially mutilating incision that is nearly always carried out by others and subject to the control and sanction of religious and state institutions—is neither as far-fetched nor as discordant as the film's reviewers seem to have found it" (440).

On the subject of puns and titles, it is remarkable how often Greyson assigns plant names to his films and videos: *The Pink Pimpernel* (1989), *Lilies, Proteus,* and *Fig Trees*. It is as if he is planting a cinematic garden.



Secrecy, but no shame: the protagonists of *Proteus* (2003) romp in the nude on a sunny, secluded beach.



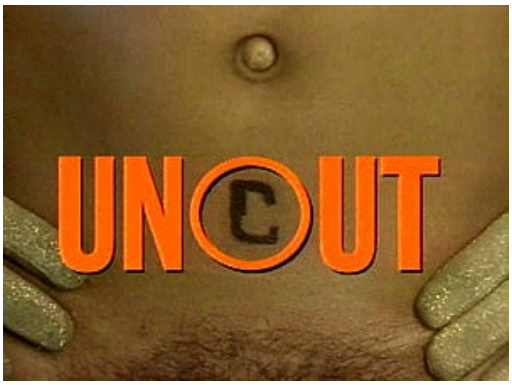
In *Proteus* (2003), Scottish botanist Virgil Niven flirts with Khoikhoi prisoner Claas Blank over a table of dissected and classified plant life: “The old-fashioned botanists would have divided these into a dozen different families. Not Dr. Linnaeus. That’s the genius of his nomenclature. He sees past the superficial differences of petal color and leaf size and focuses exclusively on sexual organs.”

The book is a magnificent companion to the box set, while also containing essays about a number of works that are not included in the latter. And, to be clear, although the book’s editors mention VTape’s release of the box set at the end of their introduction, the two projects are not otherwise linked. The book is massive, with over five hundred packed pages. The terms “vast,” “kaleidoscopic,” and “eclectic” come up time and again in the foreword and introduction. The collection features writing by some of the most important figures in queer and media studies of the past thirty years, including Douglas Crimp, Chuck Kleinhans, Laura U. Marks, Cindy Patton, Chris Straayer, and Thomas Waugh, as well as a foreword by B. Ruby Rich. Their writing is complemented by contributions from a number of younger and less well-known scholars. The assembled essays offer various theoretical points of entry into Greyson’s films and videos, drawing on the ideas of everyone from Jurgen Habermas to Guy Hocquenghem and from Leela Gandhi to Vivian Sobchack, as well as the more expected mining of Bakhtin, Benjamin, Brecht, and Foucault.



“Hi, I’m from the humane society. There’s a snake. It’s escaped.”: The innocence of cruising, even for a heterosexually married man, in *The Jungle Boy* (1985).

The majority of the contributors are based in Canada, and they provide an important perspective on Greyson’s oeuvre in the context of this understudied national cinema (understudied, that is, south of the border in the United States, where I write this). At the same time, many of the contributors insist on the transnational dimensions of Greyson’s work, which bounces from Toronto to South Africa to Sarajevo to Moscow to Palestine—and not as often to the United States as one (again, meaning an American like me) might assume. It quickly becomes clear, from perusal of either the box set or the book, that colonial adventure stories, not westerns, were formative texts for Greyson as a boy, and that his activism and filmmaking in adulthood have been shaped by a sharp awareness of his identity as an Anglo-Canadian and thus a subject formed and marked by the history and legacy of the British Empire. In her contribution to the collection, “Fables of Empire: The Intimate Histories of John Greyson,” Susan Lord explores the queered versions of Rudyard Kipling and Sir Richard Francis Burton who act as protagonists in some of Greyson’s earliest films and videos.



The proximity of language and embodiment, copyright and circumcision: the opening title sequence of *Un©ut* (1997).



Rudyard Kipling takes a bath in *Kipling Meets the Cowboys* (1985).



Sir Richard Francis Burton struggles to understand the protocol of an ACT UP meeting in *Zero Patience* (1993).

The second part of the book, "Obsessions," is probably the best aid in understanding Greyson's work through an auteurist lens, because the essays in this section trace the characteristics and preoccupations (i.e., "obsessions") that span his career. The first three essays in Part II (by Richard Fung, Chris E. Gittings, and Lord) offer rich overviews of the transnational dimensions of Greyson's work. The next three (by Scott Mackenzie, Gary Kibbins, and Christine Ramsay) explore its postmodern dimensions, with particular attention to Greyson's distinctive blending of humor and seriousness, fantasy and documentary, and his recurring practices of anachronism and transhistorical fantasy.

In a number of films, Greyson teleports historical figures to present-day Canada to intervene in local sexual politics. For instance, in *Urinal*, his first feature-length work, a number of queer artists, writers, and intellectuals who were alive in 1937 are mysteriously summoned to an abandoned church in Toronto and then magically time-traveled to 1987 to research and investigate the unfolding crisis of police entrapment of gay men for having sex in public restrooms throughout Ontario. The assembled cohort consists of Sergei Eisenstein, Frida Kahlo, Langston Hughes, Yukio Mishima, and Canadian sculptors and lovers Florence Wyle and Francis Loring (who live(d) in the church), as well as the fully fictional Dorian Gray. Not all of these historical figures were openly gay or bisexual, though they were all rumored to be. In one of the most amusing and mind-bending scenes in the film, they take turns around the dinner table sharing the most gay-speculative passages of their respective biographies, which they bought earlier that day from a second-hand bookstore. Later in the film, Mishima's late-life romance with fascism becomes a point of interest for the assembly, most of whom, in 1937, are aligned with international communism and the republican cause in the Spanish Civil War.

The 100-minute video interweaves campy, *Big Brother*-style interactions among the famous figures (the police have the house under surveillance) with quite informative illustrated lectures presented by each member of the group in turn, including:

- Loring's "Selective Social History of the Public Washroom," which covers four thousand years from the Palace of Knossos to the present;
- Eisenstein's "Guided Tour of Toronto's Hottest Tearooms," which also becomes a how-to guide to cruising; and
- Wyle's "Policing of Washroom Sex in Toronto," which features interviews with various local gay activists working on the issue.



The six historical cast members contemplate the words and image of Dorian Gray (off camera) at the end of *Urinal* (1988).



Yukio Mishima reads from his own biography in *Urinal.*

The video remains remarkably fresh almost thirty years later. *Urinal* uses its early video/personal-computing aesthetic to its advantage, suggesting that queer history is as malleable as the rubber-stamp tool in a PC paint program. Or, as John Champagne puts it in his valuable contribution to the collection (an excerpt from his 1995 book *The Ethics of Marginality*):

> "In an attempt to counter the historical tendency of the media to stabilize, conserve, and ossify both the past and the present as future past, there is, in *Urinal*, a constant refusal to leave the image alone, a perpetual construction and destruction of the visual field that highlights the immediacy of the image, its potential for deployment in the present" (354).

In this way, the video (along with many others by Greyson) speaks to the current wave of artist projects and scholarly interventions that are re-envisioning queer history and archives.[3]



In *Urinal*, history is as malleable as the rubber-stamp tool in a PC paint program: here images of Yukio Mishima overtake the screen.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Videomaker



A woman film critic—introduced with an intertitle that reads "Pauline Kael?"—offers a libidinous review of Korda's classic film in *The Jungle Boy* (1985).



A mock audition in *You Taste American* (1986).



Videomakers are likely to gravitate to the short videos included in the box set. These pieces demonstrate what an artist can do without a large crew, gobs of money, and the other resources of commercial cinema. The disc containing Greyson's shorts from the 1980s reveals his origins and development as an artist, when the celebrated theatrical features of the 1990s were still just a twinkle in his eye. The early analog videos are unable to match the beautiful 35mm photography and other high production-value achievements of *Lilies*, yet they evince terrific ambition and experimentation, both formally and conceptually. All of the auteur-defining qualities laid out in the previous section are visible in an early work like *The Jungle Boy* (1985), the second video of Greyson's Kipling Trilogy. One already finds the interrogation of the legacy of British colonialism, the plotline about cruising and police harassment, the presentation of gay male sexuality as a solvent for entrenched divisions of race and class, and the dense conceptual and theoretical layering. A Pauline Kael-esque character offers a review of Zoltan Korda's 1942 film adaptation of *The Jungle Book* that mixes postcolonial analysis with an illuminating, if perhaps overreaching, gay-subtextual reading. She posits, for instance, "Shere Khan the tiger as an S+M leather stud" and "Kaa the Python as a vain old queen." It is inspiring to see a talented artist working with a low budget in a non-professional, even superseded, medium. In video after video, Greyson turns apparent limitations (i.e., fuzzy images, untrained actors, and minimal sets) into advantages: tools for a critical reflection on spectatorship, affect, and politics.

The short videos also showcase the multimedia interdisciplinarity of Greyson's practice. Many of the pieces are best understood as works of video art, connected less to theatrical film than they are to parallel genres of media installation, artist theatre, and performance art. For this reason, the box set is likely to increase interest in Greyson among art historians, who, judging by the contents of the book (which is comprised mainly of film and media scholars), have not yet sufficiently engaged with his work.

According to the useful filmography at the end of the book, Greyson's 1986 video *You Taste American* was adapted from a mixed-media performance of the same name (505). This particular video seems, in turn, to have been a means of testing out the ideas and strategies that Greyson deployed two years later in *Urinal*: in the earlier video it is the recently deceased Michel Foucault and Tennessee Williams who are teleported across time and space to Ontario. Greyson places the same emphasis on process and improvisation in his formal treatment of the video medium as he does in his direction of performances in front of the camera. *You Taste American* is more loosely assembled than *Urinal* (which is itself pretty loosely assembled) and includes wavy split-screens, projected text, competing voiceovers, a mix of documentary and original footage, and mock auditions for the casting of its various roles.

Observing how theater bleeds into cinema in Greyson's early videos sharpens a viewer's attention to this same quality in later works, particularly the features. *Un©ut* (1997), for instance, has tighter scripting, higher production values, and more professional acting than *Urinal*, but it is just as much a theater-film hybrid. In contrast to the perimeter of hung, painted sheets that distinguishes the various

In *Urinal* (1988), Frida Kahlo flirts with Langston Hughes in a living room set made of painted sheets.



Two characters flirt in a much more realistic, though still highly artificial, basement video bar in *Un©ut* (1997).





The guard leads the three prisoners to their cots in *Un©ut*.

rooms of the abandoned church in the earlier film, *Un©ut* unfolds in more clearly distinct and more normatively furnished and decorated spaces. At the same time, these spaces remain highly artificial, in part because they are often inexplicably placed outdoors, but also because they are oddly underpopulated: no other patrons than the three main characters are ever seen in the basement bar despite its multiple tables, and no other inmates are viewed in the outdoor prison even though it has six cots. The typist Peter does have two co-workers, but the dimensions of their open-air, rooftop office dwarf them.

Greyson no doubt could have tossed in some extras for the sake of "realism," but he chose not to. The sense of filmed theater is heightened because realism's apparatus of surrounding noise, the hustle and bustle of other lives happening around the central conflict, is made so conspicuously absent: the whole world can be seen over the characters' heads, and it is empty. Greyson devises a new balance among narrative absorption, aesthetic appeal, critical reflexivity, and political provocation for every film and video he makes. For me, *Un©ut* is one of the least successful blends, but this is likely only because I haven't yet fully grasped the purpose of its central distanciation devices. If *Un©ut* were a play, with a small cast of talented actors performing at the center of a few large, well-designed sets, I wouldn't find the effect so odd.

Videomakers will also find much of value in the book. The hundred-plus pages of Greyson's own writings showcase how an artist uses theory, as opposed to how a theorist uses art—though, in Greyson's case, the line between theorist and artist, like the one between essay and film, often breaks down altogether. Not surprisingly, there is a fluidity and playfulness in Greyson's use of theory that is missing from most of the more professional scholarship elsewhere in the volume. In a piece from 2002 titled "Something Always Seems to Go Wrong Somewhere: Eisenstein at the Barricades, Pasolini at the Baths," Greyson reflects on his and other filmmakers' efforts to bring "left politics, queer desire, and avant-garde ambitions" together on the screen. Looking back on these efforts, he notes humorously,

> "Like a well-intentioned three-way, these encounters were often more disruptive than productive, both conflicted and aborted, often tinged with hostility and frustration" (284).

The essay goes on to reveal some of Greyson's thoughts on the American queer film avant-garde, including the triumvirate of Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, and Andy Warhol. Pointing out that these filmmakers never engaged substantively with the organized left, he makes it clear that his own work is better understood in relation to those who did: not only Sergei Eisenstein and Pier Paolo Pasolini, but other European greats such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Jean Genet, Isaac Julien, and Rosa von Praunheim.

The book also includes a great deal of information about Greyson's milieu of fellow artists, activists, and collaborators in Toronto, where he has primarily lived and worked since moving there from London, Ontario, at the age of eighteen. These sections valuably illustrate how an artist is shaped by and in turn shapes his place. A number of artists from the same Toronto art circle as Greyson, such as Richard Fung, Mike Hoolboom, Deirdre Logue, and David Wall, contribute writing to the collection. And Greyson's affecting eulogy for videomaker Colin Campbell, an ex-lover and collaborator who died in 2001, is also included. In his insider-y contribution to the volume, Thomas Waugh indicates other collaborators who became, at least for a time, more than that, including conceptual artist A.A. Bronson and fellow AIDS video activist Gregg Bordowitz (34-35). Considering the interplay of sex and art across Greyson's oeuvre, this is wonderful information to have, and I'm glad it has been inscribed onto the



More oddly underpopulated sets: the rooftop transcription office in *Un©ut*.



Videomaker Colin Campbell acting in Greyson's *The Jungle Boy* (1985).



Documentary meets opera in *Fig Trees* (2009).

historical record.

Pedagogue

Teachers will be both inspired and daunted by the vastness of both the box set and the book. Ideally, one would teach the two together in a glorious auteur course devoted to Greyson. For those seeking to incorporate the material into a survey course on queer cinema, Canadian cinema, postcolonial cinema, or video art, the book unfortunately does not include a comprehensive, stand-alone, "introduction to Greyson and his oeuvre" type of essay. Thomas Waugh, the premier scholar of Canadian queer cinema with his 2006 study *The Romance of Transgression in Canada: Queering Sexualities, Nations, Cinemas* (a similarly massive tome from MQUP), has written insightfully about Greyson many times in the past, but the essay he contributed to the present volume, though it contains wonderfully powerful doses of gossip and sexual frankness that are informed and justified by more than three decades of friendship, ultimately riffs so freely and personally that it may not work well in an undergraduate classroom, at least not as an introductory or overview text.

A teacher might draw instead on one or some combination of the "Obsessions" essays in Part II of the book, such as the great pieces on Greyson's internationalism by Richard Fung and Chris E. Gittings, or editor Scott MacKenzie's analysis of the filmmaker's postmodern treatment of humor and history. That said, even the essays in the collection that discuss multiple works and span Greyson's career tend, as one might expect, to devote their attention to newer and less written-about works and have little to say about his more classic, oft-studied films. Because I cannot imagine not teaching *Zero Patience* and the late 1980s/early 1990s AIDS activist shorts in my own queer cinema class, I would be inclined to do a week first on them, using the classic writing by Douglas Crimp and the new essays by Cindy Patton and Kay Armatage included in the collection, and then turn the following week to more recent films and videos and a selection of the "Obsessions" essays.[4][open notes in new window] For those preferring a more focused exploration of one film rather than a survey, Part IV of the book is comprised of in-depth studies, including Shannon Brownlee on *Lilies*, Roger Hallas on *Proteus*, and Brenda Longfellow (one of the book's editors) on *Fig Trees*. Longfellow's essay is particularly valuable in its illumination of a difficult film, clarifying the history and politics of opera and what it means for Greyson to have combined it with documentary.

Other pairings of essay and film/video are easier said than done. While the book is comprehensive, the box set, though huge, is not. Moreover, by some strange fluke, the essays that comprise Part I of the book are almost exclusively about films and videos that are *not* included on the box set. Although this does not detract from either collection—the box set remains a treasure trove, and at a steal of a price—I imagine a teacher will want to know the gaps before jumping in.

Most of the important shorts that are absent from the box set are ones of medium length, i.e., longer than twenty minutes but shorter than an hour. Two solidarity documentaries that Greyson collaborated on in the 1980s are not included: *Manzana por Manzana* (1983), in support of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, and *To Pick Is Not to Choose* (1985), about conditions facing farmworkers in southern Ontario. These are apparently straighter films than what followed, in the sense that they are more traditionally documentary and also lack homosexual themes. Chuck Kleinhans describes and contextualizes the films well in his contribution to the book and draws out some of the nascent qualities that Greyson soon developed into his distinct style. Another straight film (in the

second sense) that is missing from the box set is Greyson's 2000 narrative feature *The Law of Enclosures*, about the past and present of a long-married heterosexual couple. Unfortunately, at the time of this writing I am unable to locate the movie streaming or on DVD. Thankfully, it is represented in the book by a theoretically sophisticated essay by Peter Dickinson, who reads the film, however straight it may be thematically, as no less queer in its play with temporality than Greyson's other works.



In a still from *The Making of "Monsters"* (1986) incorporated into *Un©ut* (1997), we see and hear Greyson performing his "Mack the Knife" parody "I Hate Straights." The Weill estate's refusal of rights to the song has kept the 1986 film out of circulation.

The most notable absences from the box set are four medium-length works that are explicitly about sexual politics and that come up rather frequently in the book. One of them is Greyson's breakthrough 16mm short *The Making of "Monsters"* (1991), in which Bertolt Brecht (played by a catfish) and Georg Lukács (played by a human) debate how best to direct a made-for-TV movie about the murder of a gay teacher by five schoolboys in Toronto. This film is probably the hardest to find of all of Greyson's works, because the Kurt Weill estate has refused copyright permission for its parodied versions of Weill's songs from *The Threepenny Opera* of 1928, which was itself, ironically, an appropriative work based on John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* of 1728. A few years later, Greyson incorporated his take on the conflict into *Un©ut* (1997), a feature-length fiction-doc hybrid that fearlessly exposes how copyright law distorts cultural work and, by extension, cultural memory. A series of titles explains that though Greyson had the money to clear the song rights, the Weill estate balked when they saw the film. That same year, the estate had no trouble granting permission to MacDonald's to parody the tune of "Mack the Knife" in its "Mac Tonight" commercials. Greyson suggests that a mixture of homophobia and brute capitalism created the double standard.

Hopefully a healthy bootleg exchange will rise up around *The Making of "Monsters"* just as it has around Todd Haynes's *Superstar* (1987), which was similarly pushed underground because of copyright issues over music. I was able to see Greyson's film years ago thanks to a mentor in grad school. It's a shame not to have access to it again as I write this review, because after binging on Greyson's other works I'm ready to think in more nuanced ways about the tension between Lukacsian realism and Brechtian distanciation that he thematizes and explores in that early film. Essays in the collection by Laura U. Marks and (writing collaboratively) Susan Knabe and Wendy Gay Pearson do their best to fill the void.



Tableau vivant: the character Simon as Saint Sebastian in *Lilies* (1996).

Two major AIDS activist videos from 1989 are also not included in the box set: *The Pink Pimpernel* and *The World Is Sick (sic)*. These are significant works within Greyson's career as an AIDS activist videomaker, bridging the gap between his safer-sex music video *The ADS Epidemic* of 1987 and *Zero Patience* of 1993. Thankfully, scholar Cindy Patton, who has been writing about HIV/AIDS for as long as Greyson has been making films, analyzes both videos in her contribution to the collection.

The last notable absence from the box set is *After the Bath* (1995), which VTape was kind enough to let me preview. The video is vital for understanding the trajectory of Greyson's work as an activist mediamaker focused on public sex, police surveillance and entrapment, and moral panic. Commissioned by CBC Newsworld, After the Bath investigates police and media responses to an alleged "kiddie-porn ring" that came to attention in London, Ontario, in 1993 and that led, over the following two years, to the arrests of fifty-seven adult men on charges of sexual involvement with male youth. Intervening in the events as they were still unfolding, the video presents interviews with a range of people involved: police investigators, the accused men, sexually active youth, social workers, community activists, lawyers, and journalists. The result is a complex mix of divergent perspectives and arguments. Impressively, Greyson manages to call the claims of the police investigators and mainstream journalists into question while also being forthright about his own uncertainty as to what exactly happened and whether it was exploitation. In his brilliant essay about the video, Vincent Doyle draws on the ideas of Habermas and Nancy Fraser to analyze Greyson's effort to create an "interpublic sphere": "a public and discursive space that does not (yet) exist, but which the documentary suggests may well be possible and desirable" (86). He goes on to specify,

> "Greyson's documentary shifts the focus away from the category of 'child pornography,' about which there can be little reasoned debate, towards the more complex question of the moral and ethical implications of male teenagers above the age of consent engaging in consensual sexual activities with older men, sometimes in exchange for money or other forms of 'consideration'" (88).



A cute young thing lip-syncs "To Sir, With Love" first in a Greek toga…



…and then as a British schoolboy in *The Perils of Pedagogy* (1984).

Of all the difficult topics Greyson has tackled in his career, from HIV/AIDS to Israel/Palestine, this may be the most difficult, drawing on all his reserves of formal innovation, theoretical savvy, good humor, and sexual frankness to open up space for productive dialogue.[5]

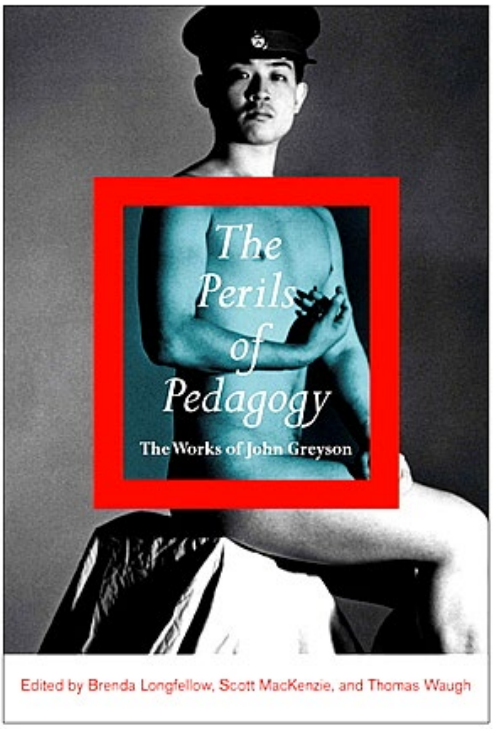
There are surprisingly few essays in the collection that offer sustained comparisons of Greyson to other film and videomakers. He's made so much work that a person could spend all day, all week, all semester, bouncing his films and videos off of each other without looking farther afield. Kass Banning's contribution to the volume is an exception. Exploring the use of *tableaux vivants* across Greyson's oeuvre, the essay draws productive connections to queer aesthetic uses of the same device in the films of Derek Jarman and Isaac Julien.

Banning's essay invites an educator to imagine other film pairings and three-ways. For instance, *Urinal* could anchor a unit on the queer politics of public bathrooms that might also include William E. Jones's minimalist reworking of early-1960s Ohio police surveillance in *Tearoom* (2007) and Tara Mateik's investigation of the politics of gender-segregated bathrooms from a trans perspective in *Toilet Training* (2003). Similarly one could imagine a unit on queering history that pairs one of Greyson's films or videos (virtually any of them would fit the bill) with Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989), Barbara Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), or Chris E. Vargas's *Liberacéon* (2011).

This discussion of teaching Greyson's films and videos must conclude with a meditation on the book's title, *The Perils of Pedagogy*, which takes its name from the earliest piece included in the box set, a five-minute video that he made in 1984 when he was twenty-four years old. In the video, a lascivious middle-aged man, complete with bald head, open shirt, and hairy chest, directs a cute young thing



Greyson as a masturbating, panic-mongering cop in *The Perils of Pedagogy*.



Dorian Gray from *Urinal* (1988) on the cover of the new Greyson anthology.

(shot sideways) to try on different outfits—Greek toga, British schoolboy— while performing a lip sync of "To Sir, With Love." The video feels campy and innocent, and the boy is hardly a minor, but still the stakes are high. Greyson pops up halfway through as a cop decked out in an overly fetishistic costume complete with shades and a mustache. He says in direct address to the camera,

> "Our biggest concern of course is that homosexuals are recruiting young boys to their ranks though coercion and trickery and then producing pornography forcing them to do unspeakable acts."

Though he appears impassive at the beginning of the shot, the camera slowly pans down his body as he speaks to reveal his hand energetically masturbating under his briefs. Later in the video, the line, "If the schools teach conformity then the gay ghetto is nothing more than a downtown campus," unfolds across five intertitles. With its light touch and pop aesthetic, *The Perils of Pedagogy* reveals the young cineaste's commitment to countering sex negativity and, perhaps even more so, his refusal to let such negativity stand in the way of his own queer education. Too young to be seen as a corrupter of youth, Greyson may have been especially well-situated to counter the escalating moral panic around the sexual endangerment of minors that erupted in the late 1970s and shaped the 1980s. When he arrived in Toronto in 1978 at the age of eighteen, he quickly established himself (to use a playful term from the book) as a *wundertwink* armed with a video camera and a honed political sensibility.

But we're now more than three decades removed from that time. The book's cover emblazons its title within a thick caution-red border over a black-and-white still of Dorian Gray from *Urinal*. He poses in the nude, seated sideways, with a police cap on his head, and he gazes directly at the camera and, through it, at us the potential readers. As I've lugged the book from café to café in the weeks I've spent working on this review, I've wondered why Greyson's name should be kept so small and this provocative pairing of nudity and pedagogy loom so large. I'm now wondering too what it would mean to put a copy of this book in the hands of every student who signs up for that auteur course on Greyson I'd like to teach one day.

Together, the book and the box set raise profound questions—ones that are difficult if not impossible to answer—about how gay pedagogy has lost some of its force and integrity as certain forms of queerness have been granted institutional legitimacy at the expense of more marginalized and outlaw sexual practices. In their inventive interweaving of history, education, and desire, Greyson's films and videos have always been projects of cross-generational queer pedagogy. But today they may be one of the few places left where that kind of pedagogy still occurs.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

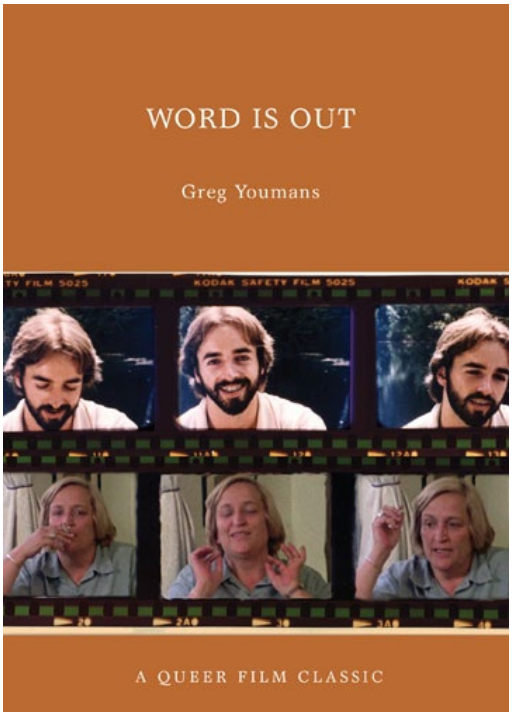
Queer Film Classics Review

reviewed by Roxanne Samer

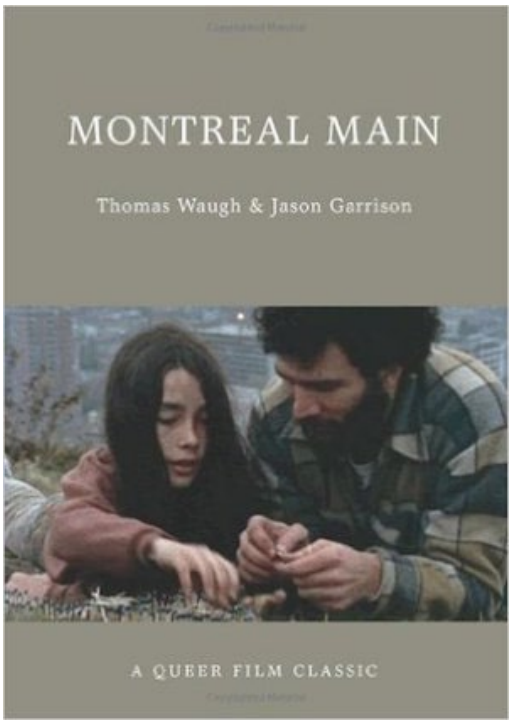
Greg Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011), 189 pp., $14.95.

Thomas Waugh & Jason Garrison, *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010), 269 pp., $14.95.

Julia Mendenhall, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014), 149 pp., $14.95.



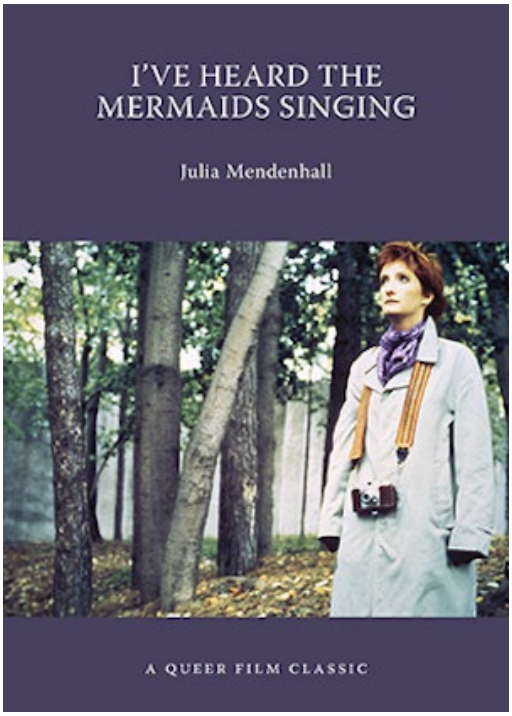
The cover of Greg Youmans' *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic* (2011).



Queer Film Classics—the title of a new book series edited by Thomas Waugh and Matthew Hays and published by Arsenal Pulp Press of Vancouver, Canada—is a challenging phrase to hold in one's mind. Each term vibrates with anticipation and impatience, jostling the one next to it and in turn that on the other side. Since its emergence in the early 1990s, queer studies has fought to be anything but "classic." It borrowed its nomenclature and took inspiration from AIDs activism of the preceding decade. The grassroots organizing of Act Up and Queer Nation had mobilized activists across gender and sexual identities against the mass shaming of HIV-positive people and mainstream gay and lesbian organizations' reactive politics of respectability. And they did as much with sardonic wit and humor.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Queer studies in turn took on assimilationist accomplices in gay and lesbian studies.[2] Queer scholars did not yearn for histories of gay and lesbian subjects, undifferentiated by time; they pursued gender and sexual variation across history and the social relations that held categories particular to certain cultures—such as "tribade," "sodomite," and "pederast"—in place.[3] Queer epistemologies did not build toward "equality" in democratic citizenship; they deconstructed the heterosexual/homosexual binary and explored how the subordination of the latter identity to the former causes the former to become dependent upon the latter for meaning, identifying potentiality in the resulting irresolvable instability.[4] In short, there was nothing "classic" about "queer."

Twenty years later, despite its intentions, queer studies has become its own field of inquiry with its own methodologies and doctrines. In the process, queer film studies has formed at its intersection with film and media studies. Many early queer film scholars built on the theories of Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Teresa de Lauretis and analyzed the processes undertaken to normalize heterosexuality in classical cinema or otherwise found threads that unraveled such texts, baring queer desires.[5] Others studied explicitly queer films and/or films by queer directors. New Queer Cinema (NQC) erupted on the 1991 international festival circuit, and in 1992 B. Ruby Rich gave it its name. The new films of Derek Jarman, Sadie Benning, Laurie Lund, Gregg Araki, Su Friedrich, and Todd Haynes, among others, made queer pleasures and queer histories paramount. Like the queer scholars beginning their research on pederasty in Ancient Greece and masculine women across the centuries at this time, these filmmakers crafted new historiographies, approaching the past through

The cover of Thomas Waugh & Jason Garrison's *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic* (2010).



The cover of Julia Mendenhall, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (2014).



The Mariposa Film Group and makers of *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978)

archaeology and alchemy.[6] Rich wrote of Jarman's *Edward II*,

> "Homophobia is stripped bare as a timeless occupation, tracked across centuries but never lacking in historical specificity."[7]

Reflecting on this historical moment would later lead Rich to reconsider these films' antecedents—those queer films made before queer cinema became what it did.[8] Writing the history of NQC is one area of the field that only seems to be growing.

Arsenal Press' *Queer Film Classics* book series makes notable contributions at this academic juncture. A collection of short monographs, each devoted to the study of a particular film (and titled accordingly, each book having the same name as the film it studies, with the subtitle "A Queer Film Classic"), the series' editors make the now only mildly audacious claim that there are films worthy of study as queer classics. In preparing to write this review, I selected three titles that struck me as particularly surprising for such a series—those on the Mariposa Film Group's documentary *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978), Frank Vitale's semi-autobiographical *Montreal Main* (1974), and Patricia Rozema's whimsical first feature *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987). To me, each of these films seemed to hold tenuous relationships to queerness. Among other things, they were all produced before "queer" became an operational political, aesthetic or analytic paradigm. The first two films, in particular, were made well within the period of the gay and lesbian movement, the oftentimes liberal politics of which queer activists and scholars would be sure to distance themselves from in the 1990s. I found that each monograph's author or pair of authors—Greg Youmans, Thomas Waugh and Jason Garrison, and Julia Mendenhall, respectively—negotiates this queer classics framework and offers his, her or their own argument about queerness and canons, historicity and the politics of memory. Direct and critically engaging, these books in the *Queer Film Classics* series challenge us to think about the role of film in queer history and the history of queer film.

Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic (2011)

Greg Youmans' *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic* (2011) is a richly researched and insightful examination of the talking-heads documentary on 1970s U.S. gay and lesbian lives made by the San Francisco-based Mariposa Film Group, which consisted of Nancy Adair, Peter Adair, Andrew Brown, Rob Epstein, Lucy Massie Pheniz, and Veronica Selver. Youmans draws on research in Peter Adair's Papers at the San Francisco Public Library—including footage from the celluloid interviews that did not make it into the final film and the film's one hundred and forty video pre-interviews—as well as his interviews with the other five filmmakers and a few of the film's interview subjects to craft a compelling story of the film's production. Youmans also situates the film historically within the late 1970s shifting U.S. political climate. *Word Is Out* made its theatrical tour in the wake of Anita Bryant's successful "Save Our Children" campaign in Miami, and the film first was first broadcasted on public television two weeks before Californians voted on the Briggs Initiative, which moved to ban gays and lesbians from working in California public schools. Such initiatives, Youmans reminds us, lead directly to the formation of a national gay and lesbian movement organized around gay rights. As U.S. lesbians and gay men began to make their presences known at ballot boxes, *Word Is Out* circulated a personable portrait of a few of theirs lives. Through his contextualized analysis of the film, Youmans untangles the varied functions of the film's cultural activism.

Youmans organizes the book into a twenty-five chapter "alphabet book" (he could

not think of a good "J"), inspired by the film's early (if, as Youmans points out, incorrect) title card—"Conversations with 26 gay men and women." This allows him greater adeptness in analysis and argument. Early on, Youmans admits that he used to have "trouble understanding how so pleasant an image of ordinary people could have been groundbreaking."[9] As has been likely the case for many queer folks who have viewed *Word Is Out* since coming of age in the 1990s or 2000s, the film's universalizing of gay and lesbian experiences, for him, made it first appear apolitical. After conducting archival research and discovering how so many people contributed to this film and its reception, however, Youmans concludes that he can no longer reduce his interpretation of the film to a singular argument. If one includes all the celluloid and video interviews conducted for the film and the feedback given at community screenings of the film's rushes and rough cut, the work of hundreds of individuals with varying ideologies went into the film. Furthermore, the final film, through national theatrical distribution and public television broadcasting, immediately reached hundreds of thousands of others, many of whom found it profoundly moving in critical as well as affirming ways. Youmans takes all of this into consideration and analyzes the film's many contributions, his unique alphabetic structure preventing one element or argument from trumping all others.



Ex-Women's Army Corp nurse Pat Bonds being interview by Nancy Adair in *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978).

In the chapters "F is for Feminism" and "T is for Third World Gay," Youmans explores how the film engaged with some of the most heated controversies happening across U.S. gay and lesbian communities in the 1970s, including generational divides among lesbians around feminism and its relevancy or influence on their sexual lives. Meanwhile, in chapters such as "E is for Editing" and "N is for Narrative," he isolates a particular formal element and analyzes the film's aesthetics, its history of edits, for example, suggesting different paths the film may have taken. Perhaps because of this thematic organization, there are a number of delightful analytic surprises to be discovered within and across chapters. In "I is for Interview," for example, Youmans begins by describing the style deployed in the celluloid interviews, wherein the six filmmakers had decided that any given camera operator (they alternated, sharing this responsibility) would serve as the interviewer as well. This, the collective believed, would better connect the flow of the interview and its filming as well as make it more natural for subjects to look at the camera when answering their questions. Youmans soon, however, focuses on the unique filming behind Pat Bonds' interview and the significance of its difference. Apparently, Nancy Adair, who knew the ex-Women's Army Corp nurse from the San Francisco lesbian bar Maud's, brought in her brother Peter Adair to get Bonds' delicious stories before wearing her out with a second interview of her own, in which and she revealed what she perceived to be the darker truths behind Bonds' comedic defensiveness. Youmans observes that such confrontational interview techniques were reserved for interview subjects of older generations, whereas younger participants, closer to the filmmakers' own ages, "seem to arrive before the camera already interpellated as authentic gay subjects," never acting out and not being taken as needing direction toward self-awareness.[10] While cross-generational conflict often seems a defining characteristic of the relations between post-Stonewall gays and lesbians and queers of the 1990s and 2000s, Youmans' account of this film's production



Ex-Women's Army Corp nurse Pat Bonds being

interview by Peter Adair in *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978).



Dennis Chiu appears unsure of himself in final interview for *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978) compared to earlier video pre-interview.

reveals such generational negotiations to have their own histories.

One of the most fascinating features of this book is Youmans' periodic analyses of the video pre-interviews he watched in Peter Adair's collection. In "T is for Third World Gay" and "V is for Video," he contrasts the video pre-interviews with the celluloid interviews that ended up in the final film to reveal how interviews with gays and lesbians of color were shaped over the production process to fit the film's universalizing liberal framework. This was not merely a matter of editing, trimming what does not fit (either in terms of running time or ideology), as is often the case with documentaries. Rather, it was a matter of switching interviewers, asking entirely different questions the second time around, or not asking some interview subjects back for a final interview. Dennis Chiu's video pre-interview was conducted by Andrew Brown, a Black man and the one Mariposa Film Group filmmaker of color. According to Youmans, the early interview focused on racism within the gay community. In the video, Chiu speaks extensively to Asian-American gay men's tendency to internalize the racist and sexist values of white gay male culture, and when Brown asks him if there are gay people in China, Chiu passionately expounds on how Western critiques of sexual repression in China are used to divert attention from the exploitations of the West in China. This is not the interview, however, that viewers encounter in the final film. Rob Epstein conducted the celluloid interview. He asked fewer questions about race than Brown had, and Chiu's answers, as they are cut into the final film, seem to hold racism and homophobia apart and suggest overcoming the former has strengthened him in overcoming the latter. While Chiu appears a bit unsure of himself in the final film, Youmans notes that Chiu seems confident in the video pre-interview. The archive does not definitively explain why this is, but as Youmans concludes,

> "Whatever the explanation, the person in the video pre-interview, with his impassioned critique of white, Western racism and imperialism, seems unassimiable to the argument and ideology of the final film."[11]

In many ways, stories such as these affirm what many of us already believe we know about the overwhelming whiteness and racism of gay liberation. In other ways, however, thanks to Youmans' adroit analysis, they reveal such conversations as having happened at that time, not merely decades after the fact.

Most of the video pre-interview subjects did not make it into the final film at all. The Mariposa Film Group conducted eight initial interviews and after screening selections from these for community audiences in San Francisco, they realized viewers were already beginning to see the film "as a definitive statement on gay life," and as a result of as much they needed to conduct many more interviews.[12] After conducting pre-interviews on video individually, the filmmakers gathered for a retreat on Cape Cod, where they screened one another's pre-interviews and discussed them each in turn. Eventually they came to a consensus as to which people should be included in the final film and who would interview whom on celluloid. Among those left behind, Youmans informs us, was Audre Lorde. In her pre-interview video with Veronica Selver, Lorde refuses to narrativize her experience of "coming out" as a purely lesbian one. Instead, Lorde rhetorically turns the question back on Selver:

> "Um, so when you speak of coming out, do you mean coming out as a black woman who is determined to make her own way? Do you mean coming out as a poet who knows that she must write or die? Do you mean coming out as a woman who loves women and feels she has a right to? Coming out as a woman who loves women and who also wants to have children?"[13]



Betty Powell speaks to black under-representation in gay and lesbian community in *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978).

Watching this videotape, Youmans notes that "Selver's abstractly personal questions seem jarringly at odds with the charged responses of the self-proclaimed 'warrior poet.'"[14] Selver does not register that Lorde's answers challenge the structural premises of the project. As if recognizing as much, Lorde continually asks Selver if she hears what she is saying, at one point even putting her hand to her mouth and calling "Yoo hoo!" While Lorde demands people confront their differences and how they get used to keep them apart, Youmans writes, Betty Powell, the one Black lesbian included in the final film, gives the impression that the only racial issue in the gay and lesbian community is underrepresentation, a problem easily solved by greater inclusion. Ironically, Lorde's exclusion from the final film retrospectively reveals this not to have been the case. Youmans shows how the Mariposa Film Group felt the burden of representation in crafting their portrait of gay and lesbian America and strove to meet community demands. He also demonstrates how the resulting liberal mosaic only did so much.

Over the course of the book, Youmans establishes that "gay" and "lesbian" in the mid to late 1970s were "rather flexible terms—arguably more so than they are now—with blurred boundaries around the identities they sought to fix and describe."[15] In the chapter "Q is for Queer," Youmans does as much by exploring the interviews with gender nonconforming participants in *Word Is Out*. Among these are the androgynous, genderqueer Tede Mathews, who claims to



Tede Mathews declares, “anything anybody wears at any time is drag,” in *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978).



Pam Jackson and Rusty Millington speak to their negotiations of gender identity and being gay in *Word Is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives* (1978).

have once identified as transsexual but now practices a more fluid gender presentation, believing “anything anybody wears at any time is drag,”[16] and the butch Rusty Millington, who casts her male-identification as a matter of the past but also appears ever the more classically butch with Pam Jackson, her femme partner and co-parent, at her side. Youmans analyzes Mathews and Millington’s dismissive statements as exemplar of second wave feminism’s reach, but he also posits that Mathews and Millington, in their gender presentations and analyses of their approach to them, speak back to this often-prescriptive politics as well. In holding both of these in tension, Youmans argues, *Word is Out* can be seen as a film that “celebrates a queer openness to change and possibility.”[17]

Elsewhere, however, Youmans also chronicles the film’s contentious reception and demonstrates how critiques similar to those that many of us might have today appeared even before the film’s release. After attending a 1976 New York City community feedback/fundraising session Thomas Waugh, for example, criticized the Mariposa Film Group in an essay for *Jump Cut* for “soft-pedaling” explicit and radical political rhetoric so as to not alienate non-politicized gays.[18] Meanwhile, after seeing the film on PBS, a number of viewers wrote in. While most expressed gratitude, a few wrote that they were disappointed by either the lack of bisexual representation or the overrepresentation of young hippies. Thus, while the film strove to hold a mirror up to the varied gay and lesbian communities from which it and its filmmakers emerged, Youmans demonstrates that this image was fractured from the start.

Youmans wrote this monograph on *Word Is Out* for others like himself, “who were not there and who now exist on the far side of the late 1970s when gay liberalism and a gay rights agenda again dominate and define the mainstream of US LGBT politics.”[19] Through his analysis of this film, Youmans opens up a period of gay and lesbian history that is more often than not closed to queer interpretation. He makes it apparent that the late 1970s was a much different time. The stakes were such then that a film like *Word Is Out* could make an impact in a way that it simply could not today. Many queer folks have moved *beyond* positive images and *beyond* binary identities precisely because of the achievements of activists such as the Mariposa Film Group. At the same time, as queer studies has taught us, the mainstream LGBT movement has streamlined these same goals under the neoliberal, corporate-sponsored rainbow umbrella of “equality.” In doing so, it has continued to repudiate queer sex’s most taboo intimacies and has too often neglected more pressing concerns, including queer youth homelessness, the incessant murder of trans women, and the U.S. government’s uncaring detention and deportation of LGBT people of color. In this contemporary context, Youmans’ history is more than a cautionary tale of a politics taken too far. It is a much-needed story of queer people, who have come before and struggled—often in passionate conversation with one another—over these very same issues of queer history, community, and politics.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic (2010)



Frank's Volkswagen van in *Montreal Main* (1974).



Frank and Bozo jerk each other off in Frank's van in *Montreal Main* (1974).

In *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic* (2010), Thomas Waugh and Jason Garrison balance rigor and delicacy as they analyze the Canadian film about a group of white male artists, who fraternize in the clubs, arcades, and fast food joints of Montreal's lower Main and contemplate homosexuality as an alternative to their rather boring experiences with women. In this now fairly obscure film, Steve (Lack) and Peter (Brawley) play the queer chorus, providing sideline commentary and offering unsolicited advice, as Frank (Vitale) falls in love with a twelve year old boy named Johnny (Sutherland), making Bozo (Allan Moyle), his best friend, jealous. Waugh and Garrison's goal here is to reclaim *Montreal Main* as a "kid film" twice over. First, they offer an analysis of the film's narrative that centralizes Johnny's desire and the adult world's denial of his agency, his father and Frank ending the relationship before it can even really begin. Second, the authors argue that *Montreal Main* a "kid film" in that it is an orphan of queer film history. While the film was once popular among gay audiences, it has since been forgotten, and Waugh and Garrison contend that this is because of the increasing taboo placed on intergenerational love and children's sexuality since the 1970s:

> "The openness and sensitivity to nuance and difference that marked the era, the basic respect and curiosity required to do justice to Frank and Johnny's relationship, have since been obliterated in the West."[20] [open endnotes in new window]

Feminist critiques of rape and pornography influenced the gay and lesbian movement in the 1980s, and in the early 1990s the pressures of right-wing politicians caused organizations such as GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) to institute a de facto policy of boy-love exclusion. While queer studies emerged around this time as a field committed to the exploration of desire, Waugh and Garrison point out that its early authors had little to say on the subject and, if anything, contributed to intergenerational taboos. Waugh and Garrison's major contribution is their analysis of these profound changes in LGBT movement discourse. Like Youmans, they dirty the break between "gay" and "queer." Situating their close readings of *Montreal Main*'s tender representation of man-boy love within such a history, they challenge readers to rethink where they draw lines around sexual, artistic, and political freedom.

Due to this particularly sensitive subject matter and because *Montreal Main* is one of the lesser-known films of the *Queer Film Classics* series, Waugh and Garrison provide ample context for the film's production, distribution, and reception as well as the more generally historical and national and international contexts in which it was made and through which it moved. The first two of the book's four chapters after the short introduction are titled "Context: Time and Space" and "Context: People and Films." In the first of these, Waugh and Garrison describe the "'perfect storm' of institutional, economic, and demographic convergence" that made the film possible and made it an iconic story of early 1970s Canadian queer life.[21] These included the recent decriminalization of sodomy in the Canadian criminal code; the collapse of censorship in much of the West in the 1960s and the resulting general laid back attitude toward and even interest in intergenerational sexuality and children's sexuality across films made in Europe and North America, such as *The Special Friendship* (Jean Delannoy, 1964) and *Death In Venice* (Luchino Visconti, 1971); the formation of the

Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC) in 1968; and such Canadian funding agencies' tendency to grant filmmakers free reign on their projects. Together these elements laid the groundwork for a film like *Montreal Main*.

In the first chapter, Waugh and Garrison also take readers through the intricate geography of the film, detailing the histories of the upper and lower Main as well as the sexual significance of settings such as the Mountain, the Mall, the suburb of Notre-Dame-de-Grace, and the Hinterland as well as the Frank's Volkswagen van, which moves the characters between these various places. Waugh and Garrison write,

> "The characters of the film inhabit these six or seven worlds unevenly, straddling or even suspended between them, between fringe and center, tradition and revolt, intersection with the sexual subcultures proper to each."[22]

In learning about each, including through the great illustrated map the authors provide, one gets a clearer sense of cultural and class-based stakes of the film's romantic and sexual encounters. These friends are neither the men cruising at the docks nor the young couples setting up families in the suburbs. Who they might be and where they might belong is what they are still figuring out, and with the means to make such journeys they appear to be in little rush to do so.

In the second chapter, Waugh and Garrison provide detailed biographies of all the major players in film, which is especially apt in this case, considering most of the non-professional actors played characters with their own names, living in their own apartments, essentially dramatized versions of themselves. By detailing how the four actors playing the four main friends, including director Frank Vitale, also appeared in different roles and positions in one another's films, the authors offer intertexual readings of their performances here. In doing so, Waugh and Garrison demonstrate that the particular homosocial queerness of *Montreal Main* was far from incidental. The press frequently asked Vitale about his own sexuality, and he spoke frankly about his ambivalence, which Waugh and Garrison describe as striking them as "prophetically proto-queer almost four decades later."[23] The authors also see this proto-queerness in Vitale's description of the film as propaganda aimed at exploring the "gray area" between homosexuality and heterosexuality. It is also in this chapter that Waugh and Garrison chronicle *Montreal Main*'s distribution and reception, from its world premier at the Whitney Museum in March 1974 to its Canadian premiere that April and its rave reviews in Toronto's gay press. In 1982 the film played at the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, where it was shown alongside Kenneth Anger and Rosa von Praunheim films.



Frank and Bozo's heterosexuality is established at the start of *Montreal Main* (1974) such that they might later transgress without too much worry.

The third chapter, "Text," then focuses on the film text itself, dividing the film into sixteen episodes and analyzing each formally and thematically. While the detailed information of the first two chapters was helpful for those unfamiliar with 1970s Canadian cinema or how sexual subcultures mapped onto Montreal of 1974, taking readers through the entire film is unnecessary. The authors make a number of important observations in this chapter. It is here that Waugh and Garrison delineate exactly how Frank and Bozo's heterosexuality is established at the start of the film such that they might later transgress without too much worry. It is also here that the camera's close attention to Johnny's sensuality is first analyzed. However, these could have been folded into the historiographical meat of the final chapter, "Sextext: Intergenerational Cinema and Politics," which by the third chapter has begun to feel unnecessarily delayed.

In this final chapter, Waugh and Garrison approach *Montreal Main* from the vantage point of the mainstreamed LGBT present and claim that the openness



Frank originally confuses Johnny for a girl in *Montreal Main* (1974).



Frank and Johnny hangout on Montreal's Mountain in *Montreal Main* (1974).



This close-up on Johnny's mouth in *Montreal Main* (1974) is an example of what Waugh and Garrison refer to as "the pedophile gaze."

and nuance of early 1970s queer communities, including those which made *Montreal Main*'s story about Frank and Johnny's love possible, are distinctly elements of the past. Beginning with feminist critiques of rape and child abuse in the 1980s, Waugh and Garrison argue, various factions of the gay and lesbian movement began to distance themselves formally and informally from boy-lovers. Under further pressure from right-wing politicians in the U.S. in the early 1990s, a number of organizations, including the International Lesbian and Gay Association and GLAAD, expelled defenders of man-boy love. Waugh and Garrison argue that the LGBTQ community has "left the Franks of the world," now considered pedophiles, "to be 'disappeared' by monstrous institutions like the sex offender registries and civil commitment prisons." Furthermore, the case "isn't that different in the radical corners of queer theory."[25]

Despite queer scholars' proud commitment to studying non-normative genders and sexualities unaccounted for by the more presentist gay and lesbian studies, they have either avoided intergenerational sexuality entirely or cast it as a thing of the distant past. In doing so, Waugh and Garrison claim, queer scholars collude with the respectability politics they define themselves against. As a film about the love of a twenty-five-year old man and a twelve-year old boy, *Montreal Main* is an orphan queer film, Waugh and Garrison argue, "because it was abandoned—not because its parents died."[26] For them, this is a grave failure of queer studies, and with this definitive chapter they seek to recover the politics and aesthetics of this twice abandoned subject.

After surveying a number of films that explore man-boy love, always eventually casting what may have at first seemed desirable on both parties' parts as trauma and abuse, Waugh and Garrison explore *Montreal Main*'s more balanced representation of Johnny and Frank. They take readers through the scene in which Frank meets Johnny, noting how the film makes apparent Frank's attraction while also revealing his initial misperception of Johnny as a girl, thus prompting viewers to ask how and why this attraction persists. Waugh and Garrison also, however, insist that their readers ask how and why Johnny wants Frank, eventually insisting he wants to keep spending time with Frank and, afraid his parents will not let him, would even like to move in. Waugh and Garrison note that we can comfortably ask these questions because the relationship, if clearly sexual, is never fulfilled. For them, this does not eradicate such an understanding or lessen the importance of exploring its repercussions.

"The pedophile gaze," Waugh and Garrison argue, "is within us."[27] They demonstrate as much by analyzing two scenes in which Johnny is captured by the camera in a sensual fashion, even though Frank is not present. In cutting to a close-up and focusing on Johnny's mouth as he drinks his orange juice at breakfast, for example, Vitale implicates the viewers in these erotics. The authors then analyze the film's use of sound to outline Johnny's trajectory as a desiring subject. They show how the silence of Johnny and Frank's early scenes together contrast dramatically with the violent outbursts of Johnny's angry father, and ask us to listen close as Johnny's smashing of the coke bottle upon being abandoned by Frank gives way to the terrible silence of being alone.

In this last chapter, Waugh and Garrison, in a methodology akin to Youmans' book of the next year, compare the advice of the secondary characters Steve and Peter between the video pre-shoot and the final film. The authors find that over the process of making the film, the queer chorus became less cajoling and more cautioning, morphing into two odd voices of respectable, white, middleclass society and the foils to Frank's potential deviance. Waugh and Garrison deconstruct one of Steve's monologues, demonstrating how his metaphors, first of drug addiction and then catching butterflies, perpetually characterize Johnny as



Johnny alone at the end of *Montreal Main* (1974).



Steve Lack, member of the queer chorus, in *Montreal Main* (1974).



Peter Brawley, member of the queer chorus, in *Montreal Main* (1974).

the vulnerable victim. However, the authors also offer a secondary reading of the butterfly metaphor, revealing another dynamic whereby Frank waits for Johnny to fly freely to him out of his own curiosity and desire. Through this layered analysis Waugh and Garrison demonstrate the dangers of adults speaking for children and advocate that we listen to them instead.

Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic (2010) is not an easy book to read. For those such as myself who came of age in the 1980s and 90s when such critiques of intergenerational sexuality peaked and then normalized, Waugh and Garrison offer a lot to think about. Ultimately, however, they make watching *Montreal Main* a critical and ethical project. For those invested in thinking about queer politics and the stories queer films tell, it is a unique and worthwhile read. Whether or not one agrees with the implications of their argument, namely that man-boy love ought to be welcomed back into the queer fold, they effectively provoke critical rigor in this oft-neglected area.In their conclusion, Waugh and Garrison reveal an audience for such work, *Montreal Main* itself having enjoyed an active underground VHS following through the 1990s and receiving a DVD restoration by Concordia University in 2009.

Waugh and Garrison clearly wrote this monograph on the film with gentleness and generosity toward those who may be discovering the film for the first time and reading their book in tandem. This book on *Montreal Main* speaks to very different, if not so distant, time in the history of gender and sexuality. However, Waugh and Garrison's kid-oriented analysis of the film is especially provocative today, as the supporters of anti-transgender bathroom bills ignorantly cast transgender women as pedophiles, while refusing to listen to the transgender children and young adults advocating for their own safety in school bathrooms.

I've Heard the Mermaids Singing: A Queer Film Classic (2014)

Julia Mendenhall's *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing: A Queer Film Classic* (2014) adeptly casts the 1987 Canadian indie as a proto-queer film, situating its production within the historical period immediately prior to both queer studies and New Queer Cinema's emergence. *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* follows its thirty-one year old amateur photographer protagonist Polly, as she moves from temp work to permanent part-time employment as a curator's assistant at a Toronto art gallery. The film is part mockumentary, as Polly reflects on her experiences at the gallery to a video camera, which the viewer only late in the film discovers she has stolen from one of the gallery's installations. The fairly tame drama that Polly witnesses between the curator, her artist girlfriend Mary, and various male buyers and eventually contributes to plays out in linear episodes, interrupted briefly a half dozen times by Polly's video camera narration and on a few occasions more extensively by her fantasies, played out in black and white, as she develops the photographs she takes in her modest darkroom at home. Offering a close reading of the scene in which the Curator commends an artist's "oblique pragmatism" to a representative from the National Institute, Polly keenly listening from the gallery's door, Mendenhall reinterprets the films send-up of pretentious artspeak as describing the film's vision for lived queer practice. To Mendenhall, Polly is our queer hero, offering us examples for how we might



Polly narrates to a stolen video camera in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987).



Polly develops her photographs at home in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987).



Polly flies in one of her visions in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987).



curate our own sense of self worth, desire, and pleasure in the face of adversity.

Like the other two *Queer Film Classic* books reviewed here, Mendenhall takes her readers through the details of the film's production, situating *Mermaids* within Patricia Rozema's oeuvre and biography as well as accounting for its funding and support and recounting its critical acclaim at international film festivals. The film was popular at the Cannes Film Festival, where it debuted, won the Prix de la jeunesse, and secured U.S. distribution with the then little-known Miramax. However, the film's feminist scholars and lesbian reviewers struggled to identify both the film's politics and Polly's sexuality, resulting in ambivalent reviews. Mendenhall takes this historical problem of the film's mixed lesbian reception as the motivation for her own analysis. Drawing inspiration from queer studies of the last quarter century, she makes an argument for thinking of Polly as polymorphously perverse, whereby the protagonist offers viewers a range of nonnormative sexual and affectional preferences, neither quantifiable as heterosexual or homosexual. Mendenhall contends there is a queer didacticism to Rozema's depiction of Polly's pleasures that is apropos to its historical moment and worthy of consideration by arbiters of the queer film canon.

The first two chapters are devoted to providing contextual information about *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*'s production and immediate reception. In "Creating the Queer Fairy Tale," Mendenhall draws on the Patricia Rozema Special Collection at the Toronto International Film Group's Film Reference Library and her own interviews with Rozema to narrate the challenges Rozema overcame in getting her first feature made. Rozema, Mendenhall tells us, was motivated to make *Mermaids* by scathing reviews of her half-hour film *Passion: A Letter in 16mm* (1985). *Passion* focused on a workaholic filmmaker who, having lost her lover to her work, addresses her genderless lover as "you" in a direct-to-camera monologue. One Toronto-based *The Globe and Mail* reviewer called the film "greatly overwrought and thuddingly pretentious." In response, Rozema, who was still closeted and had only recently moved to Toronto, made *Mermaids*, a film about the very pretentiousness of the culture from which this review materialized. Quoting Rozema's journals and recounting Rozema's frustrations writing for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *The Journal*, Mendenhall analyzes how the filmmaker wrote *Mermaids* in order to work through her developing ideas about art and media as well as her growing attraction to women. It is here that Mendenhall also describes the tensions in Canada around homosexuality at the height of the AIDS crisis and Canadian funders reticence toward funding "minimalist student films." Rozema was willing to temper the explicitness of the lesbian lovers and Polly's interest in them, and she had a champion in the Ontario Film Development Corporation. As a result, Mendenhall tells us, *Mermaids* got made quick and cheap, and Rozema's fairytale vision of overcoming personal and professional adversity through art and passion became a reality.

In "Coming Out, Cannes, and Criticism," Mendenhall contrasts *Mermaids*' international popularity, beginning with Cannes, and lesbian journalists and feminist scholars' fairly uniformly negative critiques, beginning with Chris Bearchell's article on Rozema for *Epicene* and Teresa de Lauretis' article, "Guerrilla in the Midst: Women's Cinema in the 1980s."[28]While critics at Cannes were enthralled—the film received a six minute standing ovation, and Harry Weinstein courted Rozema for the U.S. rights—lesbians were annoyed by Rozema's reluctance to come out, and de Lauretis criticized the film for what she perceived as a related ambivalence about feminism and sexual politics. Mendenhall, meanwhile, offers her own queer interpretation, whereby *Mermaids* is revealed to speak from the specificity of Rozema's self-discovery of her own lesbianism and narrativize an individual's growing ability to



Polly watches the Curator and Mary on the art gallery's monitor in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987).



Polly declares, "gender is irrelevant in matters of the heart," in one of her visions in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987).



Polly enjoys sensual and aesthetic pleasures, including photography, in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987).



identify and articulate her feelings. Mendenhall highlights a moment late in the film where Polly stands up for the Curator, who is being derided by another painter and possible ex-boyfriend, as well as the moments where Polly experiences a multitude of pleasures not typically associated with sexuality. In doing as much, Mendenhall does not argue that the Cannes critics were right and the lesbian critics wrong, but accounts for the film's queer sensibility while also demarcating its unique representation of sexuality.

This analysis develops across the latter two chapters. In "Reading Polly's 'Perversities,'" Mendenhall details her theory of Polly's polymorphously perverse sexuality, conducting analyses of the film's black and white vision scenes, including the one in which Polly draws on Freud to explain her theory to the Curator that "gender is irrelevant in matters of the heart," as they stroll along a river bank in turn of the century garb. "By depicting Polly's sexuality as polysexuality," Mendenhall writes,

> "Rozema, like Freud before her, recognizes that human excitations and desires are mutable and capricious, or to use the reclaimed contemporary term, 'queer.'"[29]

While Teresa de Lauretis would go on to coin the term "queer theory" in 1991, neither she nor anyone else, Mendenhall claims, has read Polly as distinctly "queer." For Mendenhall, Polly's queerness lays in her rejection of the heterosexual/homosexual binary and its conventional narratives, choosing instead to find her own pleasures, which advance a very unusual story in the process. Polly's visions, Mendenhall argues, are exemplary of the erotics Polly finds in aesthetics. Mendenhall uses Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema" to reclaim a primordial scopophilia (rather than fetishistic scopophilia) for Polly, wherein observing the world around her and photographing it becomes paramount. While the outside world does not understand Polly, and the Curator rejects her anonymously submitted photographs, Mendenhall describes how Polly brings these experiences home with her, in turn creating a sanctuary among her developed photographs, where she enjoys other sensual pleasures, such as eating food and listening to music (a list to which I would add, petting her cat). This builds to Mendenhall's interpretation of the film's conclusion. As the Curator, Mary, and Polly walk into Polly's darkroom-turned-forest, Mendenhall argues, they come together, now a threesome of polymorphously perverse lovers, on Polly's terms.

In the final chapter, "Envisioning Our Futures," Mendenhall returns to contextual analysis, retrospectively situating the film as the first of many queer films Rozema would go on to make. After *Mermaids*, Rozema started making more explicitly lesbian films as well as more political films, including *White Room* (1990), which, unlike *Mermaids*, graphically represented lesbian sex. Meanwhile, her autobiographical *When Night is Falling* (1995) critiqued Christian homophobia but was not considered New Queer Cinema, because its narrative more closely resembled those films that *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden described as "Giddy Gay Lite." Mendenhall explains these changes over Rozema's oeuvre in both personal and cultural terms. Around this same time, Rozema finally came out. Furthermore, the venues and sources of funding for queer cinema shifted from independent cinema to HBO, benefitting Rozema greatly.

For Mendenhall, Rozema's later productions do not merely prove the queerness of her first feature. Instead, they offer an important contrast, whereby *Mermaids*' oblique pragmatism might be better appreciated today. Mendenhall argues that the empathy with which Polly treats herself is still relevant when, even with advances in gay rights, criticism, rejection, and humiliation have yet to wane. In such moments, finding one's own little pleasures and indulging in them can be a

Polly, the Curator, and Mary walk into the darkroom turned forest in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987).

life-saving strategy. For this reason, Mendenhall claims, the film remains inspirational. This returned focus on oblique pragmatism allows Mendenhall to practically link this pre- or proto-queer past to the present and claim its relevancy to global audiences pursuing their own unique passions, visions, and desires today.

In this newest *Queer Film Classics* title, Mendenhall offers a much needed rereading of a subtle queer film that in many ways remains strange in an age where queer films made by "out" filmmakers and with "out" characters are supplemented with homosocial friendships that anticipate queer readings and yet do little to augment what that queer reading might entail. In focusing on Polly's polymorphous perversity, Mendenhall reminds us of the many pleasures films themselves provide and encourages the pursuit of even those most commonplace. Reading the book alongside watching *Mermaids* appropriately creates greater pleasures in viewing. Mendenhall's correction of de Lauretis' rather rigid reading of the film is welcome. However, a more generous reading of the film's feminist critiques could encourage a more critical engagement with the limitations of the film's queer pragmatism. The model of queer lived practice that Mendenhall lays out is highly individualistic. Furthermore, the film leaves us at the moment when the Curator, Mary, and Polly begin their adventure together. Thus, we are unsure how Polly's sexuality, so well articulated by Mendenhall, might develop with others by her side. Mendenhall quickly alludes to other minorities whom *Mermaids* might inspire. However, she does not reconcile such claims with her focus on this film's individualizing strategies and an individual, Rozema, in Toronto in 1987. While appropriating "oblique pragmatism" might offer a much-needed critique the exclusiveness of the high art world, there is a limit to which subjects can make, appreciate, and find productive adapting such a critique.

Queer Film Classics

As a book series, *Queer Film Classics* makes important contributions to the field of queer media studies. Each title amasses contextual information that is integral to further research on its given film. At the same time, there is flexibility to their format, which allows each author to pursue a question of particular interest to the study of film history, queer history, and how we remember and think about both. As early as 1993, Judith Butler anticipated the end of queer studies and queer politics, claiming,

> "If the term 'queer' is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and future role imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in that direction of urgent and expanding political purposes."[30]

Queer Film Classics takes on this challenge and keeps "queer" queer. From Greg Youmans' archival exploration of the construction of an early and necessary collective portrait of gay and lesbian life and the many routes it could have taken to Thomas Waugh and Jason Garrison's provocation about which love stories are the first to be left behind in the march toward "equality" and queer studies' own institutionalization to Julia Mendenhall's championing of everyday pleasures of looking, making, eating, and self-care, *Queer Film Classics* pushes back on the contemporary cultural and social forces working to make "queer" rigid or dull.

In reading these three titles, it is apparent that *Queer Film Classics* would make incredible teaching aids. They are written in direct and clear prose and thus would be great for undergraduate classrooms. In being assigned them, students would receive introductions to the historical and production contexts of each film.

Furthermore, their more critical analyses would offer examples for how to engage with these sometimes dated and often strange queer films, and they are likely to generate ample questions for any given class to discuss. Finally, reading *Queer Film Classics* would introduce undergraduates to key concepts in queer theory, while also teaching them about important moments in gay and lesbian history. I myself am teaching from them in my course on Queer Cinema this fall.

Since 2009, *Queer Film Classics* has published fifteen books on sixteen films (other than those reviewed above: *Gods and Monsters*, *Law of Desire*, *Trash*, *Farewell My Concubine*, *Fire*, *Death in Venice*, *Zero Patience*, *Strangers on a Train*, *Paris Is Burning*, *C.R.A.Z.Y.*, *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*, and a joint monograph on *L.A. Plays Itself*/*Boys in the Sand*) and has plans for at least seven more (on *Female Trouble*, *Arabian Nights*, *Manila by Night*, and *Scorpio Rising*).[31]

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. Michael Warner, "Queer and Then?," *The Chronicle Review* (January 1, 2012): http://chronicle.com/article/QueerThen-/130161/. [return to text]

2. Early texts in queer studies include: Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Gay and Lesbian Sexualities, An Introduction," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3.2 (1991); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemologies of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993). Michael Warner's *The Trouble With Normal (*Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) perhaps took on homonormativity most forcefully.

3. For example, see Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity (*Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998); Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999); and David M Halperin, *How to do the History of Homosexuality* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

4. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemologies of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990).

5. Alexander Doty, *Making Things Perfectly Queer* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), Patricia White, *unInvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 199), and essays by Richard Dyer, Judith Maybe, and D.A. Millier published in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).

6. B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema: Director's Cut," *New Queer Cinema: The Director's* Cut (Durham and London: Duke University Press), 25.

7. B. Ruby Rich, "New Queer Cinema," 21.

8. B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut*.

9. Greg Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011), 21.

10. Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic*, 81.

11. Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic*, 140.

12. Rob Epstein, "*Word Is Out*: Stories of working together," *Jump Cut* 24-25 (March 1981), 9-10.

13. Audre Lorde with Veronica Selver, quoted by Youmans in *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic*, 148.

14. Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic*, 148.

15. Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic*, 115.

16. Mathews quoted by Youmans in *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic*, 116.

17. Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic*, 122.

18. Thomas Waugh, "Films by gays, for gays," *Jump Cut* 16 (1977): 14-18.

19. Youmans, *Word Is Out: A Queer Film Classic*, 27.

20. Tom Waugh and Jason Garrison, *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010), 136. [return to p. 2]

21. Waugh and Garrison, *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic*, 64.

22. Waugh and Garrison, *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic*, 55.

23. Waugh and Garrison, *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic*, 71.

24. Waugh and Garrison, *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic*, 147.

25. Waugh and Garrison, *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic*, 147.

26. Waugh and Garrison, *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic*, 151.

27. Waugh and Garrison, *Montreal Main: A Queer Film Classic*, 176.

28. Chris Bearchell, "A Canadian Fairy Tale: Chris Chearchell Talks to Patricia Rozema about Taking Her First Picture to Cannes," *Epicene* (October 1987): 24-26; and Teresa de Lauretis, "Guerrilla in the Midst: Women's Cinema in the 80s," *Screen* 31 (1990): 6-25.

29. Julia Mendenhall, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014), 85.

30. Judith Butler, "Critically Queer," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 1 (1993), 19.

31. http://www.arsenalpulp.com/seriesinfo.php?index=10.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Junk dealer

review by Chuck Kleinhans

Jon Davies, *Trash* (Queer Film Classic series). Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2009.



Holly's miscarriage: Standing to demand the welfare agent stop trying to coerce her, Holly's baby bump pillow falls to the floor.

Following in the tradition of the very successful British Film Institute series of short books on individual notable films, the Queer Film Classic series appeals to both students and fans, a more general cinephile audience, and in this case some people interested in queer themes more than cinema per se. Jon Davies' contribution serves all these constituencies by examining a fairly well respected cult film from 1970 by director Paul Morrissey.

Trash went to market under the producer credit of Andy Warhol, at a time when the famous celebrity artist was a popular icon. It also entered the scene with an X rating, thus assuring it would never appear in rural and suburban screens, but would have a niche in some urban centers. And it continued a cycle of arty features starring figures from the Warhol Factory, in this case hunky hustler Joe Dellesandro and transgender heroine Holly Woodlawn.

Most viewers who sought out the film initially, or who came across it in revivals or

later on VHS or DVD editions found it a fairly entertaining very low budget feature mixing a hip blend of satiric comic melodrama, tinged with the lure of Factory personalities. What Davis adds to understanding and appreciating the film is very thorough research on the director's personality and intention. Morrissey had a deeply conservative bent and thought the film's message was that the people depicted were losers, the detritus of society. Joe moves through various scenes as just a body (though a conventionally attractive and muscular one) holding out a sexual promise for others, but in fact just seeking to shoot up heroin. As a result, he can never deliver the sex part, only drift off into his own private oblivion. In counterpoint, the other half of the couple is represented by Holly, who is in endless motion and talk, and who presents as a street person foraging for discarded materials (the other kind of junk). The raw narrative (Morrissey wrote the script which is supplemented by improvisation) is open to interpreting the director's disgust with the lower depths of New York.

But in actual experience of the work, the two stars command the screen and disrupt the intention. Joe remains a beautiful body into which we all, male and female, straight and queer, can project our fantasies. That his addicted passiveness is most of his screen time is no problem, rather it is precisely why he remains a fascinating object for our gaze. Meanwhile, Holly is not only an industrious worker as a garbage picker, she is a planner, hoping for a better future. And in the film's finest satiric climax Holly triumphs when confronting a little toad of a bureaucrat from the welfare office. Although her claim to be pregnant and need Aid for Dependent Children fails when it turns out her belly is a pillow, not a nine-month fetus, she still demands her rights as woman and mother.

Along the route of his analysis Davies, like the perfect tour guide exhaustingly covers everything there is to know about *Trash*: relation to other Warhol and Morrissey works, production details, critical reception, theories of camp, place within queer cultural studies, afterlives of the principals. I could say it tells too much, like the over-eager undergraduate doing a Senior Thesis on a beloved topic. But, hey, it's a little book and you can just skip ahead or around, as you tune in and out of the tour guide's patter and decide to look at some detail, or think about something else before he points to the next site and sight.

Morrissey intended a sour, mean naturalism to push an arch conservative agenda. Holly Woodlawn, through superb performance (including gender performance) transformed the film into a celebration of gender equality: one of the first trans cinema anthems.

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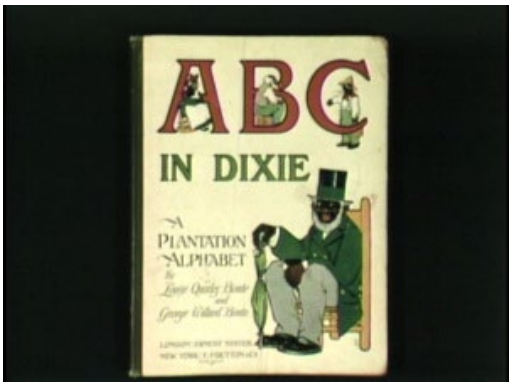
JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Ethnic Notions. *Tongues Untied*. Mainstreams and margins

by Chuck Kleinhans

from *Jump Cut*, no. 36, May 1991, pp. 108-111
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Images from *Ethnic Notions*:



Ethnic Notions extensively uses still images from many sources, especially popular culture artifacts such as storybooks, illustrated sheet music, comic postcards, newspaper images, etc.





Preface, 2016

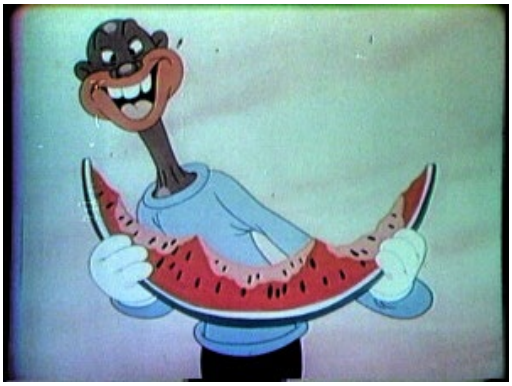
I published this piece 25 years ago. I met Marlon Riggs (1957-1994) at the premiere of *Tongues Untied* at the 1989 Video Festival, American Film Institute, Los Angeles.

It was a brand new work. Today it is a classic. The article later appeared in an online version of *Jump Cut* without the frame grabs. They are restored and expanded here.

Marlon Riggs' two major videos, *Ethnic Notions* and *Tongues Untied*, stand at two very different points of contemporary documentary activity. *Ethnic Notions* is an Emmy-winning tape using a classic PBS expository format. In sharp contrast, *Tongues Untied* weaves poetry, performance, confession, and history in a complex pattern for a personal editorial statement. The one is thoroughly conventional, the other thoroughly innovative. Both of them also represent major statements by a black intellectual who works primarily in the medium of video, rather than the traditional media of spoken and written words. At a time when print culture seems in slow but definite decline, Riggs stands among the most talented African American intellectuals choosing new forms of expression to raise critical questions for black politics and for a broader U.S. political culture.

Tongues Untied (1989, 55 min.) describes the situation, politics and culture of black gay men using an intense mixture of styles ranging from social documentary to experimental montage, from personal narrative to lyric poetry. Through daring juxtapositions, it functions as a critique of white racism as well as African American and white homophobia while sounding a call for black gay men to unite. One of the most powerful and effective political videotapes made in recent years, *Tongues Untied* is formally complex, politically passionate, and unhesitatingly self-revealing. It treats issues revealing the interconnection of race and gender politics with sophistication and in so doing persuades its viewers that these matters are significant and urgent.

Given my own situation as a straight white man, I can consider the tape's obvious importance to black gay men only in terms of the critical discussion the tape has generated. That dialogue makes it clear that *Tongues Untied* is not merely a



Short clips from commercial films, in this case cartoon animation, illustrate the stereotypes such as the Mammy and the comic Coon.



The pre-Civil War story of Uncle Tom's Cabin, first an abolitionist novel and then one of the most popular plays throughout the 19th Century, cemented key stereotypes in the white American mind.

report on gay males in the African American community, but a major intellectual intervention that is helping create the terms in which black gay men are collectively thinking and imagining their identity. While originally intended for a primary audience of black gay men, in release the tape has been shown successfully to diverse audiences. It thus becomes an important point of political discourse within the black community in general, in the gay community, and in the straight white culture. How the tape achieves that position can be best understood with a close analysis.

It is tempting to write about Riggs' work by projecting a simple development from the conventional *Ethnic Notions* to the experimental *Tongues Untied*. However I'm wary of so doing. Each represents a different strategy for different primary audiences and different issues. And subsequently Riggs produced two additional short experimental pieces —*Anthem* and *Affirmations* — while also working on a sequel to *Ethnic Notions*, tentatively titled *Color Adjustment: Blacks in Prime Time*, which covers more recent depictions. Clearly he is accomplished as a media maker in both mainstream and marginal discourses.

Ethnic Notions: the logic of mainstreaming

> "There is nothing wrong with tap dancing. There is nothing wrong with using your voice, your body, as a musical instrument. It is the laughter, and the music, and the dancing at the exclusion of dramatic images, of realistic images, that is at fault. And it's this exclusion which we hope to dissolve." — choreographer Leni Sloan, concluding *Ethnic Notions*.

Marlon Riggs' earlier tape, *Ethnic Notions* (1986) is an hour-long educational documentary on the history of popular culture's demeaning stereotypes and caricatures of African Americans from the early 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. It uses what might be called an almost pure public broadcasting format, reflecting in part its initial production in conjunction with KQED, the San Francisco PBS station. Since its first broadcast the tape has circulated very successfully in the education market. Many teachers have found it exceptionally useful in demonstrating and explaining mass culture racism to white students.

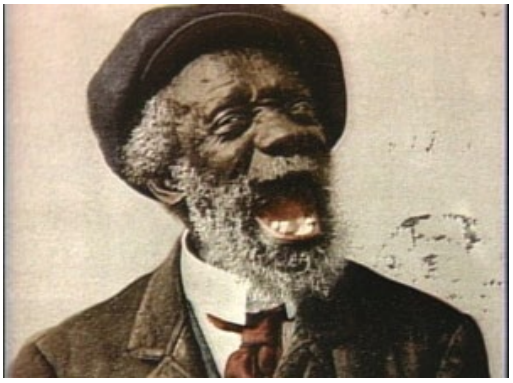


Historian Laurence Levine, author of a major book on African American folk culture, provides expert summary analysis.



African American literature professor Barbara Christian discusses the historical evolution of racial stereotypes.

A good part of this effectiveness stems from *Ethnic Notions*' use of "mainstream" presentational style. Among independent media producers, "mainstreaming" means accepting the dominant forms and values of conventional media. For those





Comic Coon types appeared in many popular graphic and theatrical forms, including sound era films.

coming from oppressed and marginalized groups — racial and ethnic minorities, women gays and lesbians, the working class and poor, political radicals, youth — mainstreaming means speaking not from one's original position, but constructing a discourse within the already established system of power in order to speak effectively within a larger circle. Fundamentally it serves the goal of assimilation for both maker and group. For the outsider group, mainstreaming implies showing how one is like the dominant culture by mimicking its forms and calling on a politics of liberal pluralism. For the media maker, mainstreaming promises acceptance, larger and diverse audiences, a chance to break into the dominant system, better chances in the grant game, bigger budgets, more prestige, etc.

Ethnic Notions uses an illustrated presentation of an analysis by authority figures. For the most part a balance of white and black, male and female talking heads identified by name and university and shot in a black limbo present the evolution of various stereotypes: the sambo, the mammy, the coon, the pickaninny, the Uncle Tom. An unseen, female, voice over narrator bridges the interviewed experts, and additional voices sing songs and read from various written texts such as storybooks. Key points are introduced with striking examples, elaborated by the academics and illustrated with still and moving images. The essayistic movement from point to point is clear, the authorities don't contradict each other and can sometimes be cut together in smoothly flowing exposition, bridged by cutaways to film clips, still and animated cartoon images, or documentary photos. The main point is undeniable: the United States has a long history of using demeaning caricatures of African Americans in its popular culture and these stereotypes embody and perpetuate racism.



The film explains the established pattern throughout the 19C of white men playing in blackface on the minstrel stage: a massively popular musical entertainment from before the Civil War (though mostly in the North) through Reconstruction and after, into the 20C.



Voice over narrator (Esther Rolle—her voice familiar to may at the time from her starring role on the black TV sitcom *Good Times*) says: “When blacks finally began to play themselves, they faced a tragic dilemma.”



Leni Sloan, Choreographer (in frame) says: “By the time blacks came to the minstrel stage, they had to perform in blackface. And so you had black men darkening their already dark skin with soot and widening their mouths and portraying themselves. Reuben Crowler was a black man from the Midwest who by the time he came to the minstrel stage had to take an Irish name because most minstrels were Irishmen performing black characters. What you have here is a weird warping of the American fabric: when a black man takes

an Irish name and then impersonates the impersonator, impersonating himself."



High production values and clear presentation make *Ethnic Notions* easy to follow. As a result, the tape has been extensively used in black studies, popular culture, and communications courses in high schools and colleges. Teachers find its examples memorable and thought provoking for students. Many white students today are not familiar with the material and find the historical review informative. Many black students can recall seeing similar examples or derivative stereotyping in their own experience. Discussion following the screening is usually lively and raises many pertinent points.

Toward the tape's end several sequences are introduced with bold intertitles that recapitulate the preceding exposition of racial slurs: black is ugly; blacks are savage; blacks are happy servants. This emphasis is just the sort of thing that in a classroom situation would start the students note taking. But in addition to its excellent organization, there are some other reasons why teachers find the tape so useful. First of all, it flatters liberal and moderate sensibilities by having both white and black experts delivering a lecture on racial stereotypes with many examples that very few white students would fail to find appalling, or, minimally, socially unpleasant to tolerate — at least in classroom discussion. Ash trays shaped like human heads that hold cigarettes in grotesquely exaggerated lips, supposedly comic postcards showing alligators threatening pickaninny children, and animated cartoons of happy coons devouring watermelon slices present images which are easily marked as offensive. As with much liberal media work, the tape makes the media the main culprit: if we could just get beyond negative images and kitsch caricatures in popular culture, it seems to say, we could achieve



The film uses a bitter montage by shifting between the mythical fantasy of figures such as the blackface performance of white entertainers showing the “carefree” coon contrasted with the documentary image of deep scars from whipping of a slave.

racial harmony and equality.

Unmistakable irony marks certain passages, as when a song about happy slaves on the plantation is illustrated with a photo of extensive scars from whippings on a slave's back. In this way it has a strategy that is rather typical of PBS historical documentary: something unpleasant from the past is shown, the present day audience can be appropriately distressed at how bad it was, and then at the end we can all feel good that it isn't like that anymore.

Because it centers so much attention on kitsch objects and entertainments such as minstrel shows and vaudeville, the tape also invites a rather easy scorn from middle class and middle class aspirant students. So obvious, so overcoded, virtually vomiting stereotypes, kitsch as the low end of popular culture consumed by aesthetically uneducated people, is always open to dismissal from a higher class position.[1][open notes in new window] The more subtle racism of middlebrow entertainment considered progressive in its own time, such as *Show Boat* or *Porgy and Bess*, and artifacts such as "tourist art" African masks sold to decorate "buppie" apartments or highbrow art such as modernist appropriations of "primitive" art goes unspoken. And because the tape displays past kitsch whose racial caricature seems even more noticeable because dated, the objects are easy to dismiss without seeing the connection to contemporary examples.



A clip from John Ford’s *Judge Priest* (1934) is used to show the continuation of the Mammy type.

The tape is undeniably effective, and especially so in classes concerned with racism in the media and commonplace racial stereotyping. Yet by its specific focus, it doesn't deal with many related issues which could be addressed. The nature of caricature and stereotyping in mass culture is not considered in depth. Doesn't mass culture always simplify and stereotype? Isn't Arnold Schwarzenegger's star image a caricature? Or Dolly Parton's? Or Spike Lee's Mars Blackmon? Should we therefore be "against" caricature and stereotyping of all kinds in art? What about high art? Isn't it also racist in its presentations? Would the history of U.S. literature or painting reveal a distinctly different ideology than the popular culture examples do? (The tape does discuss Paul Robeson's film portrayal of the Eugene O'Neill play *Emperor Jones*, and notes its continuation of the savage stereotype.) These questions, and others that could be raised in extension of ideas touched on briefly in the tape, do not invalidate it. In fact, in a teaching situation they would be welcome additions to a discussion and would lead to a more complex analysis by the audience.



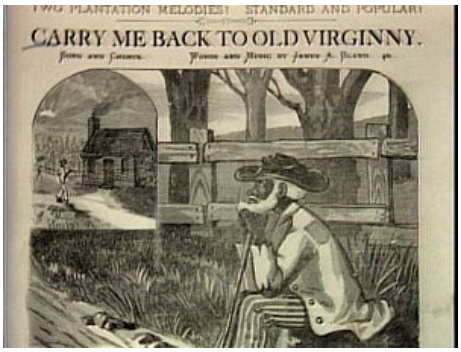
Anti-Reconstruction propaganda used cartoonish stereotypes.



After Emancipation racist propaganda was based on the previously established stereotypes.



The narration is built on a montage between racist imagining and realistic documentation of terrorism such as public lynchings.



After the Civil War popular culture created and sustained a mythological Ante-Bellum past of contented slaves, kindly masters.

Part of the problem here is that by having such a rich array of historically based materials, the tape presents most of this as a problem of the past rather than of the present. Actually the voices bring us up to the present, but visuals to cover recent material (for which it would be difficult and much more expensive to gain copyright permission) are rather spare: two tracking shots across various publications and posters at the end are supposed to suggest the continuity to today. Many might give an easy assent to Morris Day, Mr. T, Eddie Murphy, or Redd Foxx (as Sanford).[2] But would we so readily agree that Bill Cosby, Richard Pryor, Prince, Run DMC, and Grace Jones (to mention some of the figures shown) continue these stereotypes without significant change? And among works not shown how would we evaluate satire such as Spike Lee's chock-full-of-stereotypes *School Daze*? Or the TV show *In Living Color*? Does comic caricature differ somehow or significantly from simply demeaning propagandistic caricature? If so, how, and how can and do oppressed groups use humor within the context of such caricature?[3]

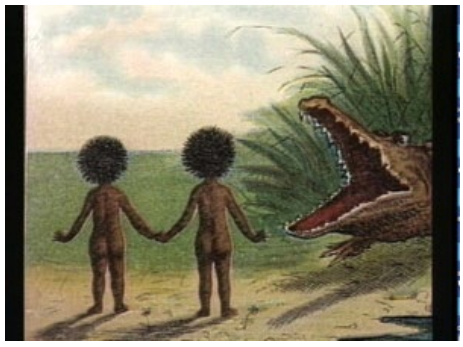


The narration constantly undercuts sentimental nostalgia with brutal truth.

Riggs addresses some of these issues briefly in *Tongues Untied*, referencing homophobia in Eddie Murphy's standup comedy and Spike Lee's *School Daze*. In a more recent article, he argues that current media representations of black gay men by black film/video makers, performers, and Rap musicians present repackaged versions of the Coon (now the Snap Queens seen on *In Living Color*) or the Brute (as in the AIDS-infected homosexual Convict-Rapist in Reginald and

Warrington Hudlin's *House Party*).[4] The result, he concludes, is to validate an "Afrocentric" Black Macho myth by creating a "Negro Faggot" Other within the black community's consciousness. In the process actual black gay men are denied their existence, their masculinity, and their blackness.





Comic stereotypes used happy coons and “pickaninny” black children menaced by alligators.





Extreme exaggeration of already distorted types was used for comic household items such as ashtrays.

A further related problem of the PBS style is that *Ethnic Notions* offers a restricted discussion of how past change took place. It marks large changes such as the ante bellum period's portrayal of happy plantation slaves changing to the Reconstruction image of savages, and it explains changing power relations as a cause. While it shows clips from *The Birth of a Nation*, it doesn't mention that the NAACP spent an immense amount of its early organization efforts in criticizing and organizing against the film. In fact, the NAACP was criticized at times by other African American and anti-racist organizations and individuals for putting so much energy into media pressure group work to the neglect of other forms of political organizing. The question of priorities must always be addressed in media organizing. To use an image from *Ethnic Notions*’ parade of stereotypes: How important, given scarce resources, is it to try to change Aunt Jemima's picture on the pancake mix? What change occurs if she turns out slimmer and lighter skinned?



The continuation of racist imagination is seen in clips from the film version of Eugene O’Neil’s play *The Emperor Jones*. Paul Robeson plays a powerful and determined black protagonist in a

The tape explains that the Civil Rights movement drastically changed the public and popular image of black Americans and that this ended the period of extreme caricature. The tape doesn't mention that this was also the period when the black professional athlete became a major part of U.S. sports entertainment. Surely having many mass culture images of physically strong and skilled African American men also shaped public consciousness. *Ethnic Notions* doesn't indicate effective strategies and tactics for today in addressing mass culture racism. Two experts indicate that there is little change in the 70s and 80s: mammy figures appear in TV shows, black comedians continue the minstrel and buffoon tradition,

dramatic role that uses his image of strength and presence. But the story depends as well on a presumed underlying savage primitivism as the source of his power. A major step forward for black acting, it continues the racist tropes of the past.

and black men in action films are shown as more violent than white men. But this is stated, not illustrated. And the question of how black audience members understand and use mass media images is not explored.[5]

In using the PBS style, there is a limit to how many major ideas you can effectively present. It is fundamentally a linear style which uses orthodox exposition to make its points: dramatic opening examples, summary of the main points to be introduced, sequential progression though each section with a recapitulation of topic points at the start of each section and a summary conclusion at the end of each section, and a final summation. The primary structuring line comes from the verbal soundtrack: it is an illustrated script. This style and organization is very familiar to the audience. Its foundation is the expository essay taught in high school and college; it remains the dominant way educational and social-political documentaries are organized. It also produces a viewing experience which students find easy to take notes on, since their notes reproduce the general outline of the argument. And it is fairly easy to remember, thus gratifying the teacher who judges the pedagogical merits of the piece by student's ability to remember and repeat the tape's major ideas. But there is a limit to the number of major ideas a mediamaker can present this way: perhaps one every ten minutes or so, or about the same that a good college lecturer would offer.

There is another level of analysis in *Ethnic Notions*, one that is more complex and subtle, though it remains subordinate and fully emerges only in a few places. This argument is about cultural contradiction. It is stated most succinctly early on in the tape when racist caricatures are explained as stemming from the paradox of a nation founded on granting freedom to all while maintaining slavery as an institution. The tape argues that popular culture images, through accumulation, shape "gut level feelings" or beliefs, or "the perception of reality," or "part of our psyche."[6] Doubtless this is the most important first thing to say about such images. But it begs the questions of power and pleasure which shape the production, circulation, and reception of such images. On two occasions critic Barbara Christian mentions that African Americans come to believe in stereotypes of themselves, which become part of their psyche. But the point is not pursued or illustrated. And because all the authorities speak in the third person about the reception and effects of racist caricature, it seems that "other people" absorb cultural racism while the authorities (and we viewers as attentive members of the audience) are inoculated against its influence.

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At the start of the 20C, Bert Williams became a hugely successful stage entertainer in the minstrel tradition, and starred in silent era films. But he had to appear in blackface with exaggerated white lips: the same look as Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer*, in 1927.



Ethel Waters sings “Darkies Never Dream,” from the 1934 short black cast film *Bubbling Over*. The song is interwoven by montage with portions of Martin Luther King’s “I have a Dream” speech. Alternating audio and images creates a sense of slowly transcending progress, an optimistic note at the end of *Ethnic Notions*.

Images from *Tongues Untied*:

The talking heads and illustrative cutaways style is significantly changed in a key section. One of the two nonacademic experts, choreographer Leni Sloan, makes several key points. First in interview, he discusses the origins of blackface minstrels first in the development of a unique African American dance style of shuffling and jumping which was an evasive accommodation to religious law which prohibited dancing which involved crossing the feet. In the 1820s a white entertainer who played as a black, T.D. Rice, mimicked a crippled black man dancing: a portrayal that became Jim Crow in minstrelsy. Sloan points out the complications of this historical evolution and its further elaboration when black performers were allowed on the minstrel stage but in blackface and with adopted Irish names. He then portrays in one-man show style, Bert Williams, the greatest African American blackface comedian who achieved star status and financial success on Broadway but who, the character tells us, couldn't get a drink in a neighborhood bar.

The effect of Sloan's presentation of Williams is remarkable within the tape because it brings the issues down to a first person narrative told directly to the camera, which accelerates an empathetic response. Sloan appears again, in the last shot in the film to say that when blacks are presented as only singing, dancing, and clowning to the exclusion of other aspects of their lives that popular culture imagery becomes racist. Sloan is the strongest of the authorities because he seems to speak with a fuller sense of contradiction, to speak from experience, from being "inside" the problem of artistic representation, while the other authorities speak from a distance.

At another point, near the end of the tape, a complex formal arrangement makes a powerful statement. Ethel Waters is seen and heard singing "Darkies Never Dream," a song that continues the pattern of docile mammies who only exist to serve whites. Intercut with her presentation is the sound and image of Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. The contrast of audio/visual elements makes a political statement and also presents the fundamental contradiction between white-dominated popular culture images and black-articulated political aspirations using distinctly video graphic means.

To sum up, *Ethnic Notions* is a remarkably effective educational tape in addressing its most specific area of concern, and its formal construction and use of the PBS style is part of that effectiveness. At the same time, definite limits to the analysis appear within the piece. In his next major video, *Tongues Untied*, Riggs found an expanded form for addressing complex contradictions.

Tongues Untied: the passion at the margins

Tongues Untied is perhaps best defined as an experimental essay or an editorial opinion tape. It explains the various situations of black gay men, and addresses that audience directly, sounding a call to action, to no longer be silent, to band together, to speak out, and to organize in their self-interest. For viewers who are not African American homosexual men, the tape permits an experience of directly hearing and seeing their concerns. And its power for this secondary set of viewers distinctly derives from the use of first person expression. Rather than assuming the dispassionate stance of a mainstreaming format, *Tongues Untied* makes its case directly by speaking of the pain and the pride of being black and gay. The



The tape begins with black men together in public social groups: here, a basketball court.



Documentary TV footage shows a notorious event from the late 1980s when a police harassed a large weekend gathering of black college men in Virginia Beach. The students then went on a rampage against local stores.

tape's goal is to celebrate "Black men loving black men." To do this, it uses a variety of forms which are native to black culture and especially to black gay culture. For its primary audience the tape provides the pleasure of recognition, but for its secondary audience it provides a series of lessons about cultural context and political expression.

Tongues Untied begins with an incantation as several voices repeatedly chant, "Brother to brother." Fading up from a black screen, we see slow motion images of groups of black men in public spaces such as basketball courts. The slow motion makes their casual glances at each other and gestures of touching and high fiving more significant than usual. But these images juxtaposed against the voice track make it clear that the male bonding depicted also covers black men's immense experience of anger and hurt in U.S. culture. A voice over narrator tells us, in meeting other black gay men:

> "I am more likely to muse about my latest piece or so-and-so's party at Club Chi-chi than about the anger and hurt I felt that morning when a jeweler refused me entrance to his store because I am black and male and we are all perceived as thieves. I will swallow that hurt and should I speak of it will vocalize only the anger and say 'I should have bust out his windows'..."

The images here change from extreme close ups of men's faces to TV news footage of the summer '89 Virginia Beach incidents where black fraternity men in the resort community were beaten by aggressive cops and broke store windows in turn. The voices multiply, and intertitles make more connections about black men's shared rage: Howard Beach; Virginia Beach; Yusef Murder, CRACK; AIDS; BLACK MEN; Endangered Species?

Silence is a way to grin and bear the burden. By starting with the experience and pain of silence, Riggs speaks to a pervasive experience of African American people in the U.S.: men, women, children, straight and gay. Knowing that some form of punishment, retaliation, and humiliation is the likely response for speaking out against oppression and injustice, blacks learn early on to be silent for self-protection. As Paul Laurence Dunbar put it in a classic poem,

> "We wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties."
> —from "We Wear the Mask," 1896

The pairing of silence/invisibility and the relation of that pair to the couplet hurt/anger forms one of the most fundamental tropes of black culture and African American life experience. Because *Tongues Untied* starts like this, referring to a virtually universal experience among African Americans, it provides initial access to the entire argument of the tape.

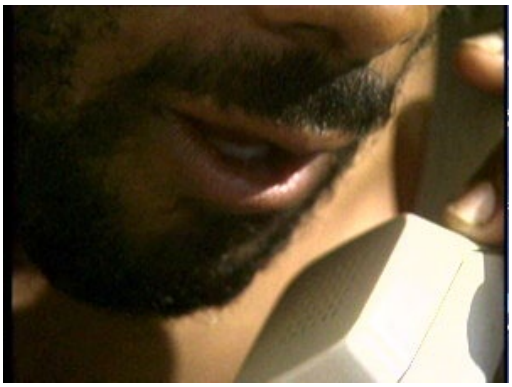


Marlon Riggs appears making choreographed movement in a black void space.



With a meditative voice over-narrative Riggs, quiet on screen, names some of the major theses of the piece.

The titles come up and we then see Marlon Riggs naked in black void (though we don't know it's Riggs at this point) while the audio track continues to refer to silence. The tape begins to make an argument against silence, calling it a shield, a cloak, a sword-one that cuts both ways. The narrator calls for speaking out for one's self, finally revealing, "now that I have faced death," asking for an initiation while we see men kiss.



Continuing the theme of black men communicating with each other, a lightly comic sequence shows a fellow making a phone sex call for a “BGA”—Black Gay Activist.

The mood drastically shifts from the dark limbo space to a brightly lit room. The camera pans across the body of a man calling a phone sex line. In a comic fantasy, suddenly the phone line is transformed. The caller seeks a "BGA," (black gay activist) for very safe sex and activist tasks such as licking envelopes. From this comic transition, the tone changes to stories of resistance, starting with the snap. Snapping, or finger popping, is a characteristic gesture in the black gay male community. It is often begun with a broad, flamboyant wave of the arm, ending in the snap, but there are endless varieties, and at a later point variations are shown. [7] [open notes in new window]

Illustrations of snaps continue with another storyteller in a black limbo who relates how on a Washington, D.C. bus ride, two brothers at the back of the bus began loudly quarrelling about which of the pair was "the bitch." As the bus goes along, filling with more commuters, the argument becomes more and more pronounced until finally one of them declares, "I'm a 45 year old black gay man who enjoys, enjoys, taking dick in his rectum! I'm not your bitch. (snap!) Your bitch is at home with your kids." (Snap! Snap!)[8]



A segue begins with stories showing the black gay male gesture of the snap! Marking a common shared gesture within the subculture and one that can be used for ironic resistance, self-declaration, and witty repartee. The multiplication of different men using the common core gesture shows individuality.



The tale of responding to racial discrimination at a gay club ends with dramatic snaps.



Various stylizations of the snap are shown.



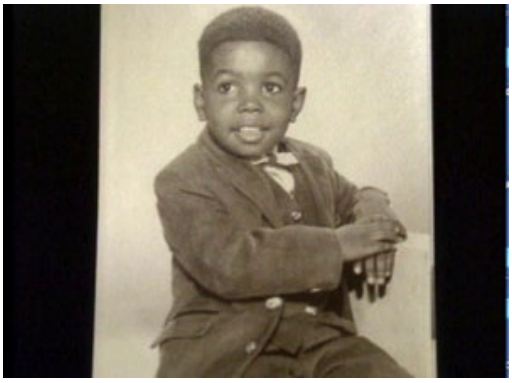
A snap master explains his craft.

The next story tells of a group of black men going to a new club and being insulted by the doorman who obviously didn't want to admit them. This story ends with resistance,

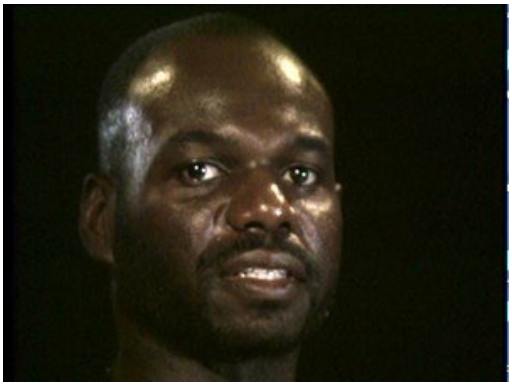
> "Three pieces of ID? (Snap! Snap! Snap!) She didn't know what hit her! We took our money and left. The next day I reported that dive to the mayor's office, the human rights commission, the NAACP, and the Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club. Don't mess with a snap diva! (punctuated with snaps)"

The tape then goes on comically to illustrate various snaps (some courtesy of the Institute of Snap!thology), which provide both a comic lightening of the mood and a documentation of a unique gesture in black gay subculture.

The story of being hassled at a bar provides a hook for the black straight audience in that they too have most likely experienced this kind of social discrimination. The tape thus provides key moments of engagement for its secondary audience. This explains some of the tape's power — it provides a multiplicity of ways to relate to, to get into, the subject at hand if one is willing to listen. It also helps explain the fact that *Tongues Untied* has been successful with many different audiences. However, the main vehicle for engaging straights, and whites, is Marlon Riggs' own story.



The tone shifts with Riggs telling his own story of realizing he was gay beginning with childhood play. Scorned by his black community, he found some solace in a white boy which set the stage for his adult object choice of white men.



The personal complexity of the black gay male experience is dramatized by returning to Riggs himself giving his autobiography. Although everyone has a unique personal experience, the structural conditions that shape and limit individual growth become clear.



Various insert shots and cutaways tell Riggs' story. Arriving as a young man in San Francisco, he found community in the gay ghetto, but realized he was always marginalized in the white

In his personal narrative, shot with a tight close up of his face, Riggs begins talking about childhood sexuality, and how, although all the little boys played at sex with each other, he was different in that the others traded giving and receiving, while he just gave it away. Later he came to understand that this unthought and spontaneous activity was actually socially condemned as he learned the terms, "punk", "faggot," "freak," and "homo." Riggs' testimony sets up the major theme of social/political constriction through language.

He then goes on to talk about how he was one of a few black students chosen to integrate a school in Georgia. As a result he was called a "Tom" by local blacks, suspicious of his relative achievement. He was also called a "Motherfuckin' Coon" by local whites, and greeted at school with "Nigger Go Home." He became totally alienated in the process. Visually this story uses extreme closeups of lips speaking the words: finally a rapid montage of slurs and insults, directed against Riggs' being black and homosexual, which surrounded his transition from child to adult. He explains that he withdrew into himself in response to these labels he never sought. The effect of this sequence for all audiences is very powerful, for almost everyone in the audience can recall facing anxieties and doubts in adolescence. Many sympathize with the eighth grader facing hostile schoolmates shouting racist comments, but the compounding of the identification by adding homophobic terms calls for a new leap of imaginative acceptance for many. This sequence demonstrates how Riggs uses first person voice. Stylistically and politically it provides a formal possibility for documentary to fulfill an increasingly necessary (on practical, theoretical, and political levels) demand to express gender/sexuality, race and class issues simultaneously and in their fully articulated complexity.

By this point in the tape it has: displayed much of its basic strategy: dealing with a complicated interweaving of black culture and gay culture in terms of verbal language and nonverbal gesture. Black subculture in the United States is verbalized by those artists who must "mouth with myriad subtleties," who often follow the lead of the African American folklore figure of the Signifying Monkey, a adroit trickster who endlessly talks himself into and out of trouble, and whose most obvious current commercial cultural manifestation is found in the range of Rap music. As a marginalized subculture, gay culture shares many structural similarities with black culture. But the differences are also significant. Since gays are not identified by physical characteristics and do not share in a common subculture from birth, the making of gay communities takes place among people who are themselves very diverse in class, ethnicity, region, age, etc. Almost all gays and lesbians can choose to pass for straight, while relatively few blacks have the option of passing for white.

In forming gay culture, then, people must find ways of identifying each other, and one of the most central ways this happens is through the creation and re-creation of distinctive language and gesture (clothing, grooming, taste in arts and recreation, are also frequently important clues). The commonplace is accentuated in a way to multiply its meanings. Thus irony, particularly an ironic self-awareness which plays with the arbitrary and artificial nature of language and gesture as social constructions, becomes an important and heightened form of expression. Camp attitude, in the broadest sense, expresses this complexity. For black gay men, participating in two subcultural frameworks at once, discourse is always contradictory: silence/invisibility is compounded by the possibilities of heightened expression as a form of resistance. And poetry becomes one of the

dominated scene.

supreme forms of that expression.

The complexity of race and gender issues is further developed in the next two sections. First we see an example of gay bashing ending with the victim prostrate on the ground after being attacked by a group (black on black). This passage substantially ups the ante by moving from verbal insult to displaying the threat of direct physical violence against gays. Here the sound track moves from percussive music to poetry relating an incident, with a visual and audio dissolve to Roberta Flack singing, "The first time ever I saw your face..." while we see a school yearbook photo of a young white man. The image increases in screen size while Riggs narrates, telling how within his school experience this person became his friend, and although they were not lovers, what a blessing it was to feel passion and what a curse that a white boy provided it. This section may well be very unsettling to blacks, for it indicates that at least some of the time the black community itself cannot take care of its own, provide the emotional sustenance to survive oppression, and in fact may be the source of considerable pain — "Tom!"



A more reflective and elegiac sequence begins with a portrait of a somewhat ambiguous genderqueer black person. The sound track reflects on love.

If the African American community stands partially indicted in the previous section, the white gay community receives its share of criticism in the next section as Riggs details his later move to San Francisco's gay ghetto: "...cruising white boys, I played out adolescent dreams." At that time, he adds, he tried not to notice what few black images were available; we see racist caricatures of mammies, studs, and slaves. He concludes that finally he realized he was an invisible man here and quit the scene.



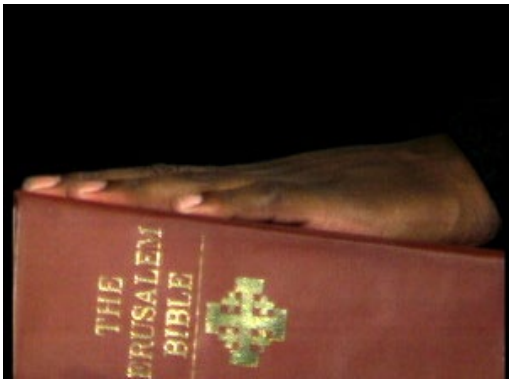
Another figure appears, easily read as trans with a slow love ballad in the background.

In finding the space to be openly gay, he loses his black identity. This marks a major break in terms of the rhythm of *Tongues Untied* and the next section serves to provide a space for reflection as well as a further complication around issues of identity. A transvestite appears, smoking a cigarette in slow motion, while the soundtrack plays a melancholy blues, Billie Holiday singing "Lover-man, where can you be?" then a second transvestite in street drag — clothing flashy enough to get you noticed, and probably noticed for cross dressing — accompanied by Nina Simone in a slow version of "Black is the color of my true love's hair," and a first person poem about choosing to dress as a woman. Appropriating black women's blues, detailing emotional sensitivity, provides a lull for considering black men in drag as fully a part of the community.

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A hand slamming down on a Bible and a preacher shouting “Abomination!” interrupts the flow.

Here and throughout the tape, Riggs provides a kind of time-release capsule in dealing with issues. Something is presented, alluded to, or hinted at, and then is referred to again at a different point in a different context. Depictions are sometimes detached from interpretations and viewers are called on to make imaginative leaps to connect the different points. Or sharp contrasts of style or mood bring different issues into focus or relation to each other.

The problem of homophobia in the black community is presented boldly as a shock cut response to the preceding drag image: "Abomination! " and a close up of a preacher's hand slamming down on a Bible — the Word institutionalized. The black political activist argues that with the homosexual, you can't tell which side he's on: black or gay. Riggs responds: as if you could somehow separate the two. Another says a gay man is no kind of a role model for kids. Again Riggs articulates the effect of such prejudice: to withdraw into silence. Excerpts from Eddie Murphy's notoriously homophobic stage routines follow, along with clips from the step show in Spike Lee's *School Daze* with the political activists stepping to the beat of repeated insults: "Fag, Fag, Fag." With a sad irony, Riggs notes this is what is produced by the "talented tenth." A subsequent montage equates the bigoted statement, the abusive insult, and the homophobic joke with violent bashing of gays (repeating the earlier visuals), inextricably linking verbal attack with physical assault.



Comedian Eddie Murphy doing a fiercely homophobic routine continues the aggressive tone.



A homophobic scene from Spike Lee’s *School Daze* continues the spewing of hate.



The response, we hear, with a slow drum beat in background, like a heartbeat, is silence and anger. This section marks the most complicated visual/verbal montage of the tape to this point. By use of a voice-over off screen Riggs gives the response, and by use of an image of a silent face (Essex Hemphill, whose poetry is prominent in the tape), gives room to mark the wound, the impact of the remark on an actual human being. This passage in the tape is dense with contradiction. To paraphrase: if not being openly attacked, one is tolerated only if silent; black gay men will sometimes laugh at the homophobe's joke if only to share in the identity gained by being die lowest of the low.

At the same time, this part of the tape re-articulates the experiences of silence and anger for black gay men. And those responses and experiences are, emotionally, perhaps their strongest shared experience with black straight men. In other words, if the oppression that all black men face in U.S. culture results in silence and anger, black gay men bear an additional burden, but one which is



Dancers demonstrating their Vogue routines turns to black gay male self affirmation and expressive behaviors.



Poet Essex Hemphill recites some of his work. Hemphill is the central poet as the film turns again to black gay male experience expressed in first person voice.



The collective power of men together is signaled with a Gay Pride parade demonstration. The banner says “Black Men Loving Black Men is the Revolutionary Act.

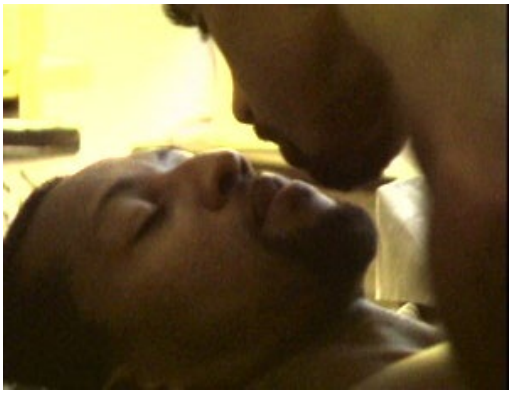
fundamentally emotionally similar to the experience of black heterosexual males. Hemphill's face, silent, unchanging, in close up, looks at the camera/audience with the face that white police and other agents of social control would call "sullen," and provides the visual reference for a complex relay of accusations which finally turn back at the viewer. Again and again the tape repeats this device of showing a face, registering it as visual fact, while a voice over either situates it or provides an interior monologue. Riggs' own image appears in a variety of lightings and framing, each change reminding us of a different facet of his narrative. The tension between sound track and visual track produces and reproduces the cultural situation of black gay men: the dominant discourse of white and heterosexual culture tries to place them outside of culture, beyond the pale, to make them invisible and silent. Resistance must begin with speech, with a counter discourse. Movement from interior monologue to public speech, from the space of one's self to public space, is the final momentum of the tape.

Another first person story details internalized oppression. It begins with a story of self-denial, of how, walking in the white gay ghetto, the speaker (Riggs) avoided looking at another black gay man. As they approached each other walking, both averted their gaze. Unable, unwilling to recognize the anger, the pain, the silence, which they shared, both sought avoidance. A chant begins: "Anger unvented... becomes pain unspoken... becomes rage released... becomes violence, cha cha cha."

A new speaker, Steve Langley, arrives to urge you, if you're economically and/or emotionally coming up short, to "snatch what's yours from the universe." From this point on the tape urges positive responses to the situations it has described. Dance, music, and dress are portrayed as expressive arts which help define and further a gender/sexual and racial identity. First, in a section that introduces voguing, we find a group of black gay men sharing dinner conversation in a restaurant (with House music under). The basics of vogue are introduced: that it is a dance form developed by black and Puerto Rican men; that its dancers imitate the styles and gestures and poses of high fashion models, including photo posing and runway display; that people form groups called houses which then show a fashion allegiance to a clothing design company — the house of Chanel, etc. While several performers are shown in their routines, a poem is read to a mother, confessing a son's gay desires and identity.

Vogue appropriates images and style from haute couture for a street based culture of resistance. For the dispossessed to "snatch what's theirs from the universe" is to appropriate from the dominant culture, from the mass culture images of fashion in Vogue, and to turn those images to their own use. This essentially postmodern appropriation, a cultural scavenging or thrift shop image recycling, brings together two distinct yet overlapping patterns of cultural resistance. African American culture from slave times on perpetuates itself within certain limits imposed by the oppressor (such as restrictions on specific movements in dancing) and maintains continuity with its African origins. At the same time it freely trades in available cultural processes from the dominant culture, such as European musical instruments.

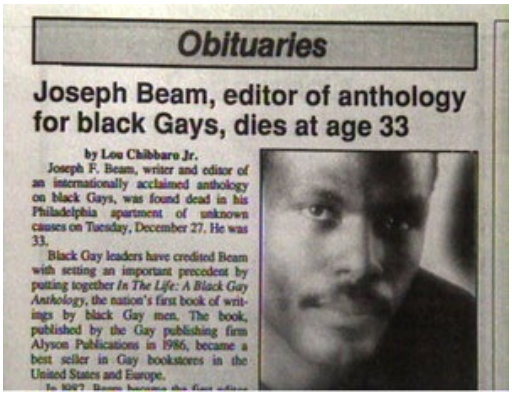
Gay culture too has often had a stance of reflection/ refraction toward the dominant culture, taking over selected parts of it in a way that allows a creative distortion (for example, the enthusiasm in part of gay male culture for opera with its emotional exaggeration, or for some the camp appreciation of Mae West or Joan Crawford, or among others the hypermasculinity of motorcycle culture imagery). As subcultures which freely appropriate from the dominant culture, African American and gay male cultures are always borrowing and changing for their own purposes. The complexity of this activity also provides many different entries into the subculture's symbolic communications for both insiders and







Personal intimacy is shown with two lovers embracing and kissing.



Obituaries

Joseph Beam, editor of anthology for black Gays, dies at age 33

by Lou Chibbaro Jr.

Joseph F. Beam, writer and editor of an internationally acclaimed anthology on black Gays, was found dead in his Philadelphia apartment of unknown causes on Tuesday, December 27. He was 33.

Black Gay leaders have credited Beam with setting an important precedent by putting together *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, the nation's first book of writings by black Gay men. The book, published by the Gay publishing firm Alyson Publications in 1986, became a best seller in Gay bookstores in the United States and Europe.

outsiders. And in turn this allows for the rapid reappropriation of the appropriated, as Madonna's recent video "Vogue," borrows and hyperaestheticizes street voguing images into high production value, high fashion, and commercial het entertainment. What on the street is an ironic appropriation by the dispossessed, carrying a contradictory message of admiration and critique, is emptied of the cutting side of its criticism when vaulted into the mainstream, although it remains somewhat subversive in its new mainstream context.[9] [open notes in new window]

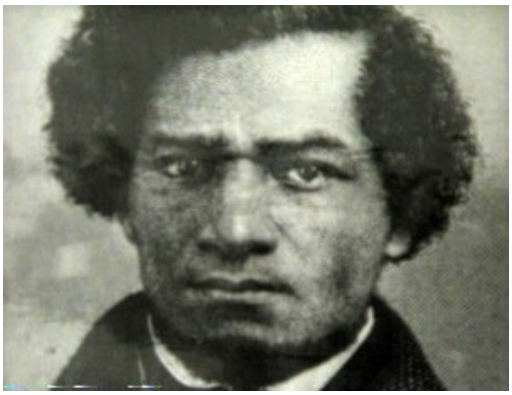
The theme of men in groups continues with dancers in a park. This imagery is crossed with a passing visual reference to a black boy dancing, imagery from an early silent film. This makes a somewhat enigmatic statement, perhaps signifying the difference between the boy dancing for the amusement of whites and these men in a group moving for their own pleasure and celebration. But there is no need to interpret the imagery. Here and at various other points in the tape, Riggs makes visual and verbal and musical allusions which remain stated but not explained.

A bar appears as another space of male bonding, a place where black gay men can look at others with desire as well as recognition. Using slow motion posterized images, this section reprises "Black is the color..." as instrumental music while another poem is heard. Further group expressions appear with a four-man doo wop group doing a fine song which has a nice irony: "Hey, boy, can you come out tonight?" The invitation to romance and to the open expression of gay identity turns the dominant culture's heterosexual expectations about men singing love songs upside down in a way that is comic and loving at the same time. The editing of both sound and image becomes more complex here. Having followed the piece this far, the audience increasingly finds references to many simultaneous levels of reference and understanding. From the sweet tender love song the soundtrack segues into the chant, "Black, Black, Black, Black! Gay, Gay, Gay, Gay!" and we see the source, black men marching together with banners in a gay pride parade. (Actually the chant is similar in form to the earlier scene snatched from School Daze of the homophobic chant, but here the meaning is totally reversed.)

The mood changes again to poetry which supplies invitations to love making and images of men undressing, caressing, and kissing. But as this set of sensual fantasies proceeds, we are brought up short with a reminder of AIDS: "never think of a fuck." And Hemphill's warning about the danger and fear of physical sex in the present underlines the anxiety ("this nut might kill us") that often forces men to deny their physical desires and emotional needs. As we see a series of obituary photos and headlines of black men, we hear Riggs: "I discovered a time bomb ticking in my blood." The last photo is his own image. "I listen for my own quiet implosion." His image dissolves into others, of heroes such as Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass and finally the sequence comes to a complex montage of Martin Luther King marching in civil rights demonstrations cross cut with the black gay pride marchers, as Riggs' voice explains his own resolve, his own move from silence to speaking. The tape thus ends with a movement into history, a placing of the individual within history. The adolescent boy, silenced when he became the first to take an historic step and integrate a white school in Georgia, has become the man who finds his voice through the community of black gay men and who has the commanding ability to express that in the video we are watching. A call to action sounds: "Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act."

This last point in the tape has become controversial in its reception. By its placement at the end, appearing in print as intertitles, and then repeated by a chorus of voices, and being phrased in the affirmative/imperative, the tape seems to privilege same race homosexual relations. At least that's how many viewers

An elegiac tone is set with obituaries reminding us of the AIDS pandemic.







The film concludes with a powerful call to change and collective action. Images of past black leaders such as Frederick Douglass combine with Martin Luther King marching for Civil Rights which is cross cut with black men marching in a Gay Pride parade.

have taken it, including Cary Alan Johnson in a review in Gay Community News, who complained, in an otherwise very positive review, that it was deceptive for Riggs to make this claim, and to imply that he had left behind days of being attracted to white men when he had a white lover in the present.[10] This comment brought a heated retort from Essex Hemphill in a subsequent issue of the newsweekly, with the poet denouncing the reviewer for narrowness,[11] and a more extended discussion of the issues by Riggs in an interview with Phil Harper.[12] Riggs has also addressed the issue in a later interview with Lyle Ashton Harris.[13] While Riggs argues for a broader, desexualized, interpretation of the slogan, the work doesn't force this interpretation, and through narrowing its focus to images of black men with black men in both social and erotic situations in the second half, after Riggs has declared that he finally left the white gay ghetto, it seems to validate racial bonding and erotic attraction at the same time. Also, there is a reprise of the image of Riggs being caressed and kissed by a black man shortly before the slogan is given. Whatever Riggs intended, he chose to leave out information that many find important.

Clearly the issue is complex enough that it demands its own space for discussion (and the Hemphill retort and the subsequent interviews by Riggs are a good starting point for that dialogue). Riggs has elaborated:

> "This is what I am addressing at bottom: So many of the reasons that prohibit us from growing, from healing, from being free are that we hate each other and we hate ourselves as black gay men. As black men, period. You see it in the statistics, you see it in the knifings and the shootings, the dropouts and the fathers' abandonments. If you acknowledge your own humanity, your own worth, you acknowledge it in relation to somebody else — we do not live in voids. And so you are forced to realize the human potential in others. ...For me the revolution will occur not when white people are overthrown but rather when we can say to ourselves, 'I love who I am, I love my blackness, my maleness. What I am is whole and beautiful, and really wonderful,' and when we come to terms with each other and say, 'I love you.' ... Until we heal on a basic level, a cultural psychological, and communal level, we will never achieve freedom; we will always be a sick people. Those are hard words, because they play into what other people consider part of the pathology of the black community. Yet we do need to acknowledge that — for reasons different from those the white conservative ideologues claim — there is sickness in our community and come to terms with it. We have to begin to heal ourselves by going through all the doors that we have locked and tried to forget about — the doors of slavery, the doors of homophobia, of internalized racism, of shame about being black. A lot of that remains hidden and becomes art of the subtext of all our actions toward each other."[14]

The structure and form of *Tongues Untied* allows for the introduction of many more issues than does *Ethnic Notions*. In comparison *Tongues Untied* is much denser and richer in its allusions and analysis. At the same time, it must be said that not everyone viewing it will have essentially the same or even a similar experience. Some people just shut down at one point or another. In a classroom screening, one student asked out loud, "Is that a man?" on seeing the transvestite on the street and, shocked that it was, refused to watch the section. This is only a more extreme example of what the tape does continually, which is to provide many subjective "hooks" into the piece that not everyone will pick up on. The tape's density — using rapid changes within specific poems as well as strong contrasts between one passage and another as well as the contrast of image against word or sound — encourages a diversity of response. The audience is invited to do a kind of postmodern sampling of the tape. A second or third viewing

brings forward new aspects of the tape's argument, and also makes clearer the relation of Riggs as principal narrator to the diverse voices of different poets who are also represented in the work. Riggs is not trying to make his own condition of testing HIV positive a point on which a major understanding in the tape turns. That he has tested positive is a fact that explains some of the urgency and perhaps some of the direct plain spokenness of the tape. It's as if he were saying that at this point in his life he wants to get certain issues out clearly and unmistakably. Yet he also implicates, with a variety of different "hooks," different viewers on their own terms of experience: as black men, as gays, as people who are facing a possibly terminal condition, as people who have experienced racism, and so forth.

The knowledge needed to understand the entire range of the piece is considerable. The ideal viewer would know the face and reputation of Joseph Beams who was an important writer and editor of the first anthology of black gay male writing, In the Life, and source of the "Black men loving black men..." quotation, as well as pick up on a visual reference to Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*. At other points, such as the comic primer on snap, the tape teaches its audience all it needs to know. Similarly with the poems. Some of the writings speak directly of, from, and to black gay experience, leaving outsiders simply to register what's said, while others such as Essex Hemphill's invitation to love, "Black Beans," are lyrics open to anyone's understanding and appreciation. The poetry which motivated Riggs to begin the project, an outpouring of new wirings by black gay men forming a cultural identity in the 80s, provides the most efficient "hook" for all viewers of the tape. It is unmistakably framed within black cultural expression — in themes, vocabulary, syntax, rhythm and cadence. Yet it is also very easy to access for people outside that culture, principally because the first person address of much of it speaks directly to the audience.

Tongues Untied does not cover all the issues of black gay men, nor is it able to explain all the details of what it does address. It seems strongly marked by men speaking from relatively stable urban experience. There's no speaking from the position of men in rural and small town situations, in the armed forces, in prison or on parole, or bound in the distress of alcoholism, drug addiction/recovery, or mental illness. It makes only the most passing allusions to the situations of gay men who are fathers and husbands. Stories of coming out, especially within one's family, are conspicuously absent.[15] It doesn't address the color line and class distinctions within the black gay community. And it doesn't offer a substantial critique of masculinity as found in both gay and straight forms, although such a critique is one of the major concerns of black women intellectuals over the past few decades.

But no work of 55 minutes length could adequately address all those issues, although subsequently, in various interviews Riggs has shown his acute sensitivity to other issues. For example, in the *Afterimage* interview with Harris he articulately argues for the importance of a variety of black women writers in developing an analysis of African American culture and politics. Making *Tongues Untied* and participating in its subsequent reception has put Riggs in a distinct position of intellectual and political leadership. He was a major speaker at the annual Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Academic Conference held at his alma mater, Harvard, in fall 1990, and his address subsequently appeared *Outlook*.[16] His essay on Black Macho media was originally given at the Whitney Museum Conference, "African-American Film and Media Culture: A Re-examination." And within a few months of *Tongues Untied* 's release, he became a celebrity in black gay culture, appearing in the celebrity columns of *BLX* and *Thing*.[17]

Tongues Untied is one of the most sophisticated philosophical and political analyses of race, gender, and sexuality ever put on tape. Analytic and passionate, it marks the point from which further questions, further explorations, must be

undertaken.

Afterword, 2016. Marlon Riggs

We are reprinting my earlier article and interview with additional images from the works.

Returning to Marlon Riggs' work several decades later, I'm struck by how powerful it remains. *Ethic Notions* was a workhorse piece from the mid-1980s on, endlessly useful for giving audiences, and especially students, black and white, important historical information and analysis to understand racism in the dominant image culture. It appeared at a time of increased awareness about the ideological effects of media and a resistance that has continued in multiple ongoing forms, including current issues such as #OscarsSoWhite. By remaining framed in a rather elementary "image of" analysis, *Ethic Notions* manages to relatively efficiently put forward the first step of a critique and a bare suggestion of a remedy. His follow-up piece on more recent work, especially on TV, *Color Adjustment*, updated the argument. Much more critical elaboration and analysis has followed, by people using a critical race and cultural studies approach, particularly in elaborating the contradictions of the minstrelsy tradition and the complexity of minorities working within commercial media.

After I published my essay, word came back that Marlon was disappointed with my analysis of *Ethnic Notions* as using a conventional PBS style. He had worked very effectively within that and interpreted my analysis as indicating the film was lacking. In part I thought it was. Simple "image of" analysis had already been extensively critiqued within feminist discussions. And much more creative critiques were already present in the independent and experimental world. Even in terms of the didactic educational essay film, by 1991, we had the *Dreamworlds* video, Sut Jhally's critical deconstruction of music video sexism using an innovative creativity.

But I was also immensely enthusiastic about *Tongues Untied* because seemed to go into a new artistic space. I think that Marlon began it from a deeply personal creative concern. He wanted to make a statement about, validating, and speaking to fellow black gay men. But when the piece was finished it arrived at a unique historical moment so it served not only to validate the black gay male community, but it also spoke to the larger queer community which had become more sensitive to racism in its own ranks, to the important role of black men, and to the disproportionate toll of AIDS on men of color. Beyond that, the US public sphere was seeing an increased presence of demands for gay civil rights, and an intense push back from the religious and political Right. The progressive forces created a space for *Tongues Untied* to successfully cross over and get a larger audience, most dramatically when it was slated to appear on PBS nationwide. The arch conservatives rallied their forces and found the perfect political spokesperson in Senator Jesse Helms who denounced the film as "pornographic." In the short run the Right won: PBS slots were often cancelled or the film was shown at an extremely late hour. But the increased attention simply validated it for a broader audience.

If you heard the film was "pornographic" before seeing it, you would never see any hardcore or extremely sexualized images on black gay men in the work itself. Instead of being a celebration of physical sexuality, the film again and again returned to issues of tenderness, intimacy, sharing, friendship, brotherhood, and support. By using his own personal history, Riggs connected directly to the viewers. When we finally do see two men naked and kissing near the end of the film, it is expressed within privacy, shared gentleness, and respect. Again and

again, the film appeals to black gay men to speak up and open, to come out of the closet, to be a political presence in the world. And just as importantly, to open themselves up to being honest, vulnerable, tender, and loving of each other. This is a call for a new kind of manhood, one which can speak without the mask, one that can celebrate love. That appeal is one that crosses over race and gender, and that gained the film the widest and most long lasting audience.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Notes

1. Most of the kitsch was collected by Jan Faulkner, one of the two non-academic talking heads, and the end credits indicate that the collection was a starting point for the tape. Why this black woman collects these items is not addressed.

[2016 addition: Faulkner's collection was the source for a show at the Berkeley art Center, September-November 1982. A catalogue from the show contains contextual essays: Robbin Henderson, ed., *Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind*, Berkeley CA, Berkeley Art Center, 1982]
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2. This is tricky ground, however. Star image can differ significantly from any one particular role, and an actor's career over time must be taken into account with a figure like Foxx, who spent most of his career in black venues and doing blue material and late in life finally became a cross-over figure with the *Sanford and Son* show. (And is the *Cosby Show* really any different except in class position of the sitcom dads?). One can easily make the case that Day (best remembered for his appearance in *Purple Rain* and his music videos with his group The Time) is a self-ironic or postmodern buffoon. Mr. T's star image goes beyond just being the violent sidekick because he is also famous for celebrity public appearances encouraging kids to stay in school.

3. In U.S. culture, Jewish comedians provide an interesting reference point for such an investigation, and Freud's *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* contains copious examples in its discussion of self-protective humor.

4."Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen," *The Independent: Film and Video Monthly*, 14:3 (April 1991), 32-34.

5. Audience reception analysis in general is now an area of considerable controversy with an older model of mass media as indoctrination being challenged by a relativist model which assumes people can and do read mass culture many different ways. The former position tends to be supported by print culture intellectuals, the latter by media culture intellectuals. For an interesting contrast consider James Baldwin's testimony of his childhood movie going experiences in *The Devil Finds Work* (NY: Dial. 1976), e.g.: "The only actor of the era with whom I identified was Henry Fonda, I was not alone. A black friend of mine, after seeing Henry Fonda in *The Grapes of Wrath,* swore that Fonda had colored blood. You could tell, he said, by the way Fonda walked down the road at the end of the film: white men don't walk like that! and he imitated Fonda's stubborn, patient, wide-legged hike away from the camera." (p. 21).

6. It would be missing the point to fault the tape for not being uniform or theoretically consistent about this idea, which most critical cultural analysis today would discuss under the term "ideology." As a message for a general audience the tape works very well by stating this general concept several times in different ways using different terminology.

7. This folkloric gesture is not explained in other terms, but one black student told me that many African American mothers get their children's attention and scold them by extending an arm and snapping their fingers. The gestural language could be seen as the adaptation of a female gesture to a gay male subcultural expression, a transformation found in other aspects of gay male culture. [return to page 2]

8. That the location is Washington is my deduction, but the story gains more resonance since mostly working class and lower middle class Black people ride the bus in that mostly black city. Thus the performance is one which is open to and for the black community. And its also one that gives lie to the later articulated notion that somehow black gay men don't "belong" to the black community. The political point is important and worth elaborating. While a certain part of the white gay male community can and does choose to live in yuppie dominated gay ghettoes, and while men of color can and do visit such places, by and large they don't live there. For one thing, because of the pervasive economic discrimination against blacks, most don't have as much money, and also they often have specific ties of job, family, friendship, and community involvement in the African American community. For another thing, there's racism in the gay ghetto, just as in the society at large. In a way this produces different patterns of homophohia and discrimination in different communities. Middle class urban/ suburban straight whites can often see out of the closet white gay men as distinctly separate because spatially they live and recreate "elsewhere." In an urban environment where the different communities do abut or overlap, straights may well be not antagonistic when essentially sharing many of the same middle class white urban concerns about having a nice, clean, cafe neighborhood. Homophobia in the white working class or the black community is often more clearly focused on specific individuals who are out in the community and openly articulated in name-calling and derogatory speech. The point being, that if there sometimes seems to be more open and overt homophobia its such communities, it is also the case that there may in fact be more overt interaction with and direct awareness of the "Other."

9. For an analysis of the complex contradictions in Madonna's star image, performance and videos: Ramona Curry, "Madonna — Pastiche or Parody?" *Journal of Film and Video*, 42:2 (Summer 90), pp. 15-30. [return to page 3]

10. Johnson, "Not in Knots: *Tongues Untied* is the Black Gay Official Story," *GCN*, Feb 25-Mar 3,1990, p. 11.

11. Hemphill, "Choice," *GCN*, May 6-12, 1990, pp. 11, 13.

12. Harper. "Speaking Out about *Tongues Untied* ": An Interview with Videomaker Marlon Riggs," *GCN*, May 6-12, 1990, pp. 10-11.13.

l3. Harris, "Cultural Healing: An Interview with Marion Riggs," *Afterimage*, Mar. 1991, pp. 8-11.

14. Hint, *Afterimage*, p. 11.

15. The importance of coming out stories in the creation of post-Stonewall gay and lesbian culture in North America is well-known. That this very importance might mark class and race privilege is a more recent insight.

16. Riggs. "Ruminations of a Snap Queen: What Time Is It?!" *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, no. 12 (Spring 91), 12-19.

17. Preston G. Guider, "Read My Lips." BLK: The National Black Lesbian and Gay Newsmagazine, 2:12 (Dec. 90), 27; "Thing Lists," *Thing* no. 4 (Spring 91), 14.

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Listening to the heartbeat: interview with Marlon Riggs

by Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage

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> [This interview was conducted by Chuck Kleinhans in Oakland CA in November 1989, with Marlon Riggs shortly after the premiere of Riggs' *Tongues Untied* at the American Film Institute Video Festival. The interview was prepared in written form by Julia Lesage.]

Chuck Kleinhans: *Tongues Untied* has a strong personal sense, which the extensive use of poetry contributes to. Would you talk about your use of poetry and how that relates to your use of the first person and inclusion of yourself as a voice and screen presence in the tape?

Marlon Riggs: In a way all the poetry that was coming out by black gay men inspired *Tongues Untied*. About two years before I made this, a number of voices had started to speak out in a very eloquent fashion and in a very different way from what you would expect. Around 1985-86 the primary means of expression for black gay men and a black gay identity was through poetry—using all forms and all kinds of expression. I saw one anthology after another of black gay voices in poetry, short stories, and experimental essay forms. All this seemed interesting material for a documentary.

I conceived of a video about poets, in particular about a black gay men's poetry workshop in New York, The Other Countries Workshop. The Other Countries collective gets together and reads *for* each other and then they undergo a sort of self criticism—of the group, of their work. Many members are first time writers, trying to get published; others are very experienced and have written a lot. I didn't know of anything like that, especially here on the west coast, and, in fact, not in many other places in the east. I was fascinated by this kind of collective support for a poetic form of expression.

Tongues Untied began with wanting to do the poets. But that could only go so far before it got reduced to, "Yeah, poets, black gay poets, that's interesting and different, but a little boring." How do you make this subject matter visually compelling? What the people were saying was extremely compelling. How could I make the tape as visually, formally, and structurally compelling? I moved more and more towards a non-linear, non-traditional documentary. After a while, I even abandoned the word "documentary," seeking my own sort of embodiment and expression in video to represent these voices, their visions, their words.

So I was really just looking at poems, especially those that dealt with being black and gay. Lots of black gay poetry deals with being black or alone or alienated. But

it keeps being gay as a subtext—if you know the poet and you know the anthology, then you read it into it. I knew I needed to find poems which explicitly dealt with sexuality as well as race. I didn't want one or the other but the convergence of the two. To select things, I read through volumes and volumes and informally had people submit things to me—meeting this person and that, talking to people, in particular, talking to Essex Hemphill. Hemphill has probably published as much if not more than any other black gay poet in this country. His work moves me extremely just reading it, and it did so before I ever met or heard him.

I had had little affinity for poetry before this. The only poet I remember enjoying was Walt Whitman, to whom I was introduced in college. I never grew up with poetry around the house or read it or used it as a form of expression. But looking at these poems I really saw what was missing. So much of what our culture considers classic poetic form doesn't address my life, directly or even indirectly. Classical poetry is about a different culture, an oppressive and alienating culture, at least in relation to my own. For once, to have poetry speak directly to my own experience was very moving.

So I was talking with Essex, reading his poetry, reading poetry from the Other Countries anthology, meeting with those poets—some of whose work had not been published—and reading and listening. In some ways, I was very promiscuous, listening to and recording anything. At one point I didn't judge whether or not something was formally and structurally a "good" poem. Rather I asked, "What's its passion?" How clearly does it state longing and internalized conflict and a sense of wanting to struggle against that? Also, could I communicate that poem in a visual medium? Some poems are wonderful but so dense with metaphor and so quick in their juxtapositions that you can't make them work with images. I had to find poems which were almost conversational in structure and style, which I knew would work in video.

In turn, the poetry inspired my own writing. I had never written in a very poetic form, and now I was writing in freestyle—not haiku or couplets but in a very condensed form, looking at images as metaphor, selecting a few iconic words and phrases that would bring up reverberations and resonances in what viewers would see and think and feel. I wanted to use everything in the way the poems did, with words and phrases coded for the black community or the black gay community.

Other people would understand, for instance, the word "snap." There's nothing obscure about it. Yet, as with any culture, if it's something you do and it's part of your ritual, when you see it as an image, it has a very different meaning for you. I felt liberated to use a lot of material like that and in a very different context. I no longer felt constrained to ask,"Will other people get it? Will it make sense? Is my communication too closed?" Poetry liberated me to be condensed in style, to select things and talk almost in metaphor. The tape's structure was scripted, but I wanted to make every moment, syllable, and word count.

I didn't come to this tape's personal involvement easily. It's not in my training or my nature or my personality. I've always hated being in front of a camera and have never even used my own voice before in a work. What really moved me to do it was the need to get at the issue of black gay men loving white gay men. Most of the writings I came across present the viewpoint of black men who love black men. They're critical of black men who love white men. But this always seems like an outsider's perspective, a critical judgement coming from somebody looking down on somebody else—who's seen in a way as betraying the race. This viewpoint might be satisfactory for black men who love black men, but for black men who are into white men it'd provoke more defensiveness and denial than anything else.

I was looking for a strategy to keep people's defenses from going up, to allow them

to hear and see and hopefully to reflect upon themselves, especially if they're in that situation. So I found myself pushed to reveal my own story. In some ways it makes it disarming for a black viewer to understand this paradox, to see someone who really believes in black culture, black life, and black history drawn in a very subconscious and, if you will, involuntary, way toward what some might consider your enemy, the opposition, or at least your alien—the other. How do you embody that in a way that makes it real and human and understandable and sympathetic even to viewers who don't feel that? So they'd understand sympathetically or even empathetically what someone like that is going through?

To make this jump meant really a big leap of faith in myself—that I could do this and it'd work and it wouldn't be self indulgent. In personal video and in personal expression in documentary, you always have to consider how far to go in your revelation. How much do you treat the camera as a diary, if you will? How much can you say before it becomes self-indulgent, boring and excessive? I worried, "Am I saying too much? What am I holding back?" It was still too sensitive for me because I didn't want to be judged on those terms. I constantly faced that struggle. After a while I stopped thinking about being judged. I said, “Well, since you put this much out here in terms of your life, you can't worry now about the little extra eighth of an inch you're about to give. By now people are with you or they've rejected you. You might as well go with it completely."

In this experimental form, I wanted an anchor. Not a dominant one-and-only point of view. There're a multiplicity of voices in the video, not just my voice. In fact, in terms of total time, the percentage of time with my voice is fairly small. But because I have such a dominant place at a pivotal point in the video, my viewpoint becomes, in a way, a thread throughout. And I hope that this sensibility gives the audience a sense of coherence and cohesion in terms of everything else said.

I have a problem with some experimental forms which go from one visualized piece of poetry to another. Yes, they may all deal with black gay identity—different voices, different people—but almost like moving from one vignette to another with no clear relation. I understood this as a problem when first thinking about the video. How do I make connections among different actors, different voices, and different forms? It's not an easy unity. I was looking for that thread—which became me. It was a structural kind of function that it became me who would provide that sort of coherence. I didn't do it by stepping in as narrator: "Now you are seeing what it looks like to vogue, children. Now you are seeing what the snap is." I wanted to provide a subtle undercurrent beneath the audio and image surface. The undercurrent is that there's a person whose journey you're going through, who you're accompanying as other people talk about their lives. And it's not as if they are telling you everything. As other people are telling you things, you get both his and your encounter with these other people.

CK: The piece has a development that makes it seem like we're present in it. In its organization, it moves from one issue to another and enriches everything at each step. Things introduced early on are reflected upon in a very different context at a later point, and we've learned other things along the way. It was really remarkable at the end of it that I had the sense that I really knew a lot more about black gay men yet they were not presented as a unity. It did not convey a sense of something like, "Oh, there's this category of black gay men, they all think alike and they all are alike." The tape made me understand that there's diversity around a set of issues and experiences, that those experiences are very different for different people. It is an incredibly difficult thing to express the complexity of any social group and to get viewers to realize, "There're things that pull us together but there's also diversity among us. You shouldn't just rest on the idea that once you have a label that you've explained something."

That was not only fascinating to me, but it gave me lots of ideas because I also make video. It was, "Oh, this is something I can steal from!"

MR: Don't feel bad. I do it all the time myself! Again, I was stealing left and right. I didn't care. I was promiscuous in terms of forms. Some filmmakers learn a certain discipline. For them, that's it. They try to apply it over and over, refining it some way. Somebody who came in once during my editing the rough-cut said, "That looks like MTV!" I answered, "I don't care if it looks like MTV. If it works, that's fine for me."

CK: Well, this is quite a change from *Ethnic Notions* in terms of voice, and whom you are explaining something to and what you are taking for granted. Yet you're also doing a continuation of *Ethnic Notions*.

MR: That's true. With *Ethnic Notions*, I was trying to communicate to a broad audience, the kind people write about in their grant proposals as "general audience." I wanted to communicate to a primary audience which was a large, multicultural, black, white, latino, asian, male, female, gay, straight, bisexual, whatever audience. It is important for everyone to understand how racial caricatures and stereotyping function as tools of socialization and social control.

First I had to assume that most viewers don't know much about U.S. history, so I had to re-inform viewers about the basic historical context for these images. And then I had to connect these images to real social consequences, so that viewers could see a relation between the image, for instance, of the black mammy and the opportunities previously afforded black women to work just as cooks, maids and housekeepers. I wanted to demonstrate the relations between image and social control.

Also, because these images work on such a deep subconscious level in our culture and have done so for so long, I was afraid to play with them. A playful, nontraditional, nonlinear, nonhistorical form could be easily misinterpreted. To have images coming this way and that, 1850s images thrown in with 1950s ones, and a sort of funny voice-over poking fun at the images—such a style could have been easily and justifiably interpreted as: "Well, you're saying that none of this is really serious. Either it's all behind us so we don't need to take it seriously anymore, or it's so well integrated in our lives and we understand it so well that we can laugh about it." I didn't feel that either of those interpretations was the case. The tape required a certain gravity, a certain scholarship, if you will, a certain sense of authority in speaking about those images.

And it required a sort of unity or consensus of voice about what those images mean. Given the audience I wanted to reach, I faced a set of real constraints in terms of what people knew and how they would interpret the material. I already knew some common reactions when people saw the images. They were either totally blown away and shocked and disgusted, or they'd look at a little figurine of a black child eating a watermelon and say, "Isn't that cute?" I realized I had to walk a fairly narrow and straight line; otherwise, things could really go awry. A more experimental, quirky or eccentric form would have deeply and rightly offended an audience that wants to understand the weight of these images in our culture and how much such images have held us down in terms of racism and discrimination and oppression. It was not an unconventional piece at all. Only the content made it different.

In *Tongues Untied*, I was not dealing with history, or at least a tradition of historical scholarship rooted in physical evidence. The history in *Tongues Untied* is phrased more in terms of the context of understanding a culture. And I use it in a kind of advocacy role, placing black gay men within the overall historical context of black struggle in this country. I was also dealing with personal expression, my

own and that of the other poets. That was liberating, too. The rules about getting the facts right or the correct interpretation of history no longer applied. Actually I now believe this other form of expression is true for conveying history, too (though at the time I didn't).

In *Tongues Untied* I was dealing with the weaving, in terms of our lives, where truth, fiction, fantasy, fact, history, mythology really interweave to inform our character, psyche, values and beliefs. Changing my mind about traditional history has been part of my evolution. Before I considered history and mythology, fact and fiction as separate and obviously discreet. Now I don't think so in terms of how they inform us and work within us to make us who and what we are as individuals and as a culture, as a group, race, and nationality.

Without these constraints I not only could express a very different content but had room to play with form. I could experiment in a way that even might confuse some viewers. Since my intended primary audience was really focused on black gay men, I didn't mind if everybody got it. It was important that everybody got the point of *Ethnic Notions*. Frankly, with *Tongues Untied* if white heterosexuals don't understand the reasons why black people are angry and just consider this piece militant, then so be it. I'm not going to take time to justify this for people for whom this experience is totally alien. *Tongues Untied* is an affirmation of the feelings and experiences of black gay men, made for them by a black gay man, or actually by black gay men because the piece has a number of voices. If others understand, fine, but making sure everyone understands was not my prerequisite in making this.

Audience is very important to me, but in terms of thinking critically about who your audience is and how you intend to reach them. Who are your other potential audiences and how they might read your work? Are they are as important as your primary audience? It's very important to think about those issues before actually constructing your work because it affects what you do and the decisions you make.

CK: What has been the response so far? I know it's only been fifteen days since its premiere.

MR: Phenomenal. I really never expected it quite like this. Before its first showing at the American Film Institute Video Festival, I was in the editing room day and night. I didn't have work-in-progress screenings to gauge people's responses. I was fairly isolated, just trying to finish this— because when school got started again, I wouldn't have an editing room and students would be coming in asking questions. If I didn't finish it now, I wouldn't until sometime next year. Editing was really a focused and intense time, just trying to make things work. I had an image in my mind, which worked when I saw the reels in my head. I was trying to make the editing tape conform to that. Then the first showing was at the AFI Video Festival to an audience that really was not my intended primary audience. To have people react so wonderfully was a shock.

I thought, if people liked it because of its strange form, I'd be appreciative but I'd gauge the real response a few weeks from then when I could show it to gay black men. But I found it extremely heartwarming to have the content, that is, the black gay experience and my expression of it transcend being a message to black gays and speak to others who have also felt alienated, outcast, silenced, and for me to see how they could understand the piece's reverberations on that level.

I've had a second screening here at the Film Arts Festival with a packed, sold-out crowd at the Roxy Theater in San Francisco. It was just amazing. I was on edge, facing a hometown crowd including some of *Tongues Untied*'s participants who'd never seen the video before. I was anxious and wondering, "What are they going

to think? Did I get the credits and names spelled right?" I worried about all the little minutia, not really able to enjoy the flow. "Are they getting this? Are they going to laugh now?" I couldn't tell. I was so keyed up that it wasn't until afterwards when people stood up and gave a standing ovation (I hear it was the only one at the festival) that I realized that people were really responding. Especially when I got outside and everyone was coming up, a friend said, "I'm not a black man. I'm not a gay man. I'm a straight, white, Jewish woman. But I understood what you see and what you meant and what you were saying, and I loved it!"

The response came because the piece said something that hadn't been said before, but also *Tongues Untied* said it with such passion. There's no yelling and screaming throughout the piece; it doesn't rant or rave or rage against white people. It's not that kind of piece. But there's passion suffused throughout. The feeling and emotion, as well as the personal revelation seem to have touched people. *Tongues Untied* is still in its infant years, actually infant weeks. We'll see if it can stand on its two legs soon and face the world.

CK: I want to use it in a class that I'll be teaching on at mass culture and subcultures. We're looking at how subcultures use and borrow from mass culture, taking things over from mass culture for themselves. I saw that kind of appropriation happening again and again on the tape and I was really fascinated with the section on vogueing. Historically, black intellectuals were concerned about this process. DuBois wrote about the significance of spirituals, looking beyond how the songs promote resignation and getting a reward in heaven to stress their resistance to present oppression. Richard Wright explained black culture by seeing this element of resistance in the blues where often outsiders have really misunderstood it.

MR: Or understanding it, have tried to distort it.

CK: Again and again the tape shows this kind of appropriation, which intrigues me. I want to demonstrate to my students how a subculture forms a cultural identity and how it can make powerful assertions about itself in a way that outsiders do not see. Or if they do observe it, they don't understand it very well, especially what function it has.

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MR: This tape is partly about community-building. It's an affirmation of some of the things that we as black gay men take for granted. For example, lots of people snap. They snap on every syllable, and they don't think about it. You can go from Mississippi to California to New York and this cultural form will be recognized—there will be a response. Some people are ashamed about snap because they look at it and think, "Oh, we know he's a gay man." Yet, snap is also a form of resistance, a form of saying, "Yes, I'm different and I'm also proud of it." And there's that kind of resistance and affirmation throughout the tape—the vogueing, the dancing, the deliberately so-called-effeminate gestures in vogueing. You need a way to separate and deliberately distinguish yourself. You need somehow to affirm those gestures which the dominant culture looks down upon and considers inferior or reflecting a flawed personality or a flawed culture. We take that and reverse it in a way, so that it becomes a virtue rather than a vice or flaw.

Again, popular, black American dancing is so much a part of our culture, yet unfortunately some people are ashamed to dance within a public setting. "White folks will see us and will think, well, we're always happy, dancing darkies." But you have to look at it on your own terms, from your own standard and not continually from eyes of blue. Look through your own eyes and realize that that is a form of cultural resistance, community building and cultural affirmation. If you do that, then you dance as liberation. In the dance sequence that follows the vogueing sequence, after you've seen men vogueing singly, you see an entire group of men dancing in the park. It's very brief, but it's a very strong moment. What might seem like, oh yeah, black folks dancing, you've looked right at it and now you're seeing it not just as dancing but as resistance and as liberation. In the tape, it's become a way of finding your way back to community, when you might have been lost within competing notions of alienation either because you dance for whites, or you do or don't dance, or whatever. Now in a way it means finding your way back to your root, finding a way to an identity which is not just individually affirmed but culturally and socially affirmed.

CK: Another thing that I liked is the doo-wop singing in four-part harmony.

MR: I deliberately wanted to take the cultural forms that are part of the black community, that are very well-respected and well-loved, that in some ways are deemed classic cultural forms. It might be dancing or singing, here it's four part doo-wop harmony. (I actually had wanted to do rap, a black gay rap, as well, but I couldn't get that together. Maybe it'll come in the future.) My goal was to take those things which in some ways have become very much enshrined in traditional popular culture, black American popular culture, and infuse them with something just a little bit different. In this case, a black gay aspect. Viewers can be simultaneously hooked and repulsed: "Boy, can that child sing! He's talking about black men loving black men." I'm playing with such conflicted reactions throughout *Tongues Untied*. The marching, the civil rights protests interwoven with black gay men marching in gay rights marches, the black-gay-doo-wop love song. All of these things sort of snap, like the rhythm and rhyming of rap. We're talking about something that's in black gay expression. All the time I'm playing with traditional forms, yet altering them, perhaps innovating them because of this infusion of a black gay expression.

CK: Another thing I responded to very strongly because I see people actually

having these experiences was the story on the bus where a man just totally dramatically takes over a public space and insists on his gay presence at the risk of bodily harm, if someone wants to go after him. These are kinds of incidents that the straight world does know about. Yet there's this way in which, rhetorically, when straights talk, they'll act as if they don't know anything about gay culture, or that they've never met gay people, or there're only "them" out there in the media or only those people in the Castro, or something like that. As if in their own community they've never had this experience.

I know you haven't had any chance to hear many reactions but it seems risky even admitting that children...

M: That children have sex?

CK: It's one of those things that people often don't want to hear or think about, even if they know it. Since it comes after the bus story, it seemed in a similar vein —things that people know about but often repress. Anyone who has ever raised a child or been a child knows that children have sexuality, yet culturally it gets obliterated. And people know that there are black gays but that gets obliterated, too.

M: It's strange, it never seemed like a risk. Perhaps it's a personal revelation, but it didn't seem such a big thing. At least in Fort Worth, Texas, as I was growing up, many friends talked about having sex at age six or seven or eight. You're not having, wow, adventurous sex, but you're experimenting. It is not that unusual in the black community, nor is it to admit what you liked. It was okay if you had sex with boys as long as you were the one on top, because then you were still a man or a boy. Only when the position was reversed were you like "cheap pussy," if you will. The term—to conquer the pussy—I obviously did not use in the tape. But these things were truths.

I decided that what I was going to deal with were in some ways explosive yet deeply repressed things in our community. Whether it was taking on the church, or taking on Eddie Murphy, or taking on child sexuality and child sex (children having sex, not just having sexual feelings but actually engaging in copulation). That would have to be done. It was either say nothing or go all out. I'd just have to take those risks and see how people react. I speak from within the black community, to which the tape is primarily directed; in the black community as well as in our society overall, there are things that we just don't deal with. We like to keep up a pretense that certain things aren't happening, certain knowledge is not known, certain behavior never occurs. Yet all of these things do go on. In this one area, I wanted to lift the lid and speak: "Yes, this happens. You can deal with it in a different way, but you will no longer deal with it by silence or deal with it by avoidance and oppression."

This acknowledgement is confrontational for some, I imagine, depending on where they're coming from. I haven't had that reaction yet, but the tape's been shown to sympathetic audiences. I will learn very shortly when we show it in a sociology class, which has a large latino and black population, not people who are particularly gay or progressive. We'll see how students react there. I know it will be very different and threatening.

CK: Would you say a little about the section with the transvestite walking by the lake and your choice of music.

MR: The Nina Simone and Billie Holliday sections follow my voyage of trying to find self-in-community within the Castro (San Francisco's so-called gay mecca) and not finding it. In fact, I found just the opposite, what I'd already known, racism, hatred and bigotry. It was much more nuanced, much more subtle than

what I'd found in the south growing up, but very present and obvious to me. As a transition in the tape, I drop my story and do not follow a conventional narrative, which would be to indicate when I say I left the Castro in search of someplace better to show me someplace else. This confuses some viewers and I realize was a risk. The narrative line now moves into other stories, other identities which are much like my own. Not exactly, I've never been a drag queen, attracted to drag queens or dressed in drag as experimentation. Rather, I bridged this experience with my own, so that after you hear me saying, "I left the Castro obviously longing for something better," you hear a Billie Holliday song: "I don't know why, but I'm feeling so sad. I long to try something I never had. Lover man, where can you be?" If you follow this metaphor, the lover man is not just a lover to sleep with but also lover-man community, friends, fellows, fellowship—where can you be? The image is one many people would find repulsive, a street drag queen, obviously rough-looking, not someone elegantly dressed with fine coiffured hair and makeup. You have to look at the humanity within that person and see that the experience which moved by my telling my story now applies to this person. And it's just through her gestures, her look, her sitting there that I was hoping that this empathy would be communicated.

Part of this sequence is personal. I love Billie Holliday and Nina Simone. I grew up with these songs. To use them means bringing up stuff from my past. I played those songs over and over as a kid and listened to them as my parents played them. That's partly why my own Nina Simone album is so scratched but I don't care if it's not perfect sounding. At age ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, I felt so lonely. Listening to this music kept me thinking that there must be something better than this. In the tape I used those songs as personal reflections from my life, which would hopefully bridge this identity to these very different people. Transvestites are different from myself and very different from most people we're seeing. Lots of men, even gay men, are repulsed by drag queens, consider them inferior and look upon them as caricatures, not seeing anything beyond the surface. That means looking upon transvestites in the way the straight community looks upon black gays or all gay men. I used this music to try to overcome that distance, to make these people real and their grief, longing, and needs as respectable and noble and as sympathetically felt by an audience as what was understood from my own story.

The Nina Simone song was one I had always loved. I played over and over as a kid and teenager the way some people played Beatles' songs or the Fifth Dimension or the Temptations. I'd pick up the record and play it again and again: "Black is the color..." I'd listen to Simone's voice tremble, it'd get so soft and it was so filled with....I didn't know then why that song had such strong feeling and meaning for me. Now I look back and see obviously why. Her voice is androgynous and could almost play as a man's voice: "Black is the color of my true love's hair...his hands...his face"--it's obviously male gender here. That was before I knew I was gay and my response was not about a man talking about a woman. I had this sort of involuntary response to that song which really built up over the years.

I guess I'm very much like many gay men in that some women vocalists are the people whom I most admire and who speak what I feel. When I was looking for another copy it was tough to find that particular album. My parents have the original and theirs was too scratched up to use.

I came across Essex's poem, "A Homicide," about a very different experience, about a black drag queen being murdered. But I didn't interpret it in that way. When I looked at the line, "His grief is not apparel. It is a wig it does not rest gently on my head," or when he's talking about, "I look, I search the waterfronts for the man I love," those words have a very different meaning for me. They are about community, longing, need, love, the need for love and affirmation, and are

not just about grief. In this sequence in the tape, the song, those words, and that image which I wanted to humanize for people worked.

CK: One interesting thing on the sound track is a heartbeat pattern. It provided an emotional tone through some of the things that were being said.

MR: It was a synthesized heartbeat, but a heartbeat. I knew that I'd eventually come to the line where I say on camera, "In search of self, I listen to the beat of my heart." The payoff was to keep on getting much further down. That's how I used the heartbeat—as I was doing with lots of the images and with audio in general. I wanted constantly to recontextualize things so they'd mean something different each time you hear them. The first time you hear the heartbeat is over the title sequence, where you see me in slow-mo. It played like a rhythm, an introduction; it was dramatic. There it was just an audio device, nothing more than a heartbeat. You don't know what it means, it's just emerging from something. The next time you hear it is where you see the Castro images, and then you're hearing it in relation to me in particular, so perhaps it's my heartbeat. Then you start hearing it in relation to others' heartbeats, in the wages-of-silence sequence where you hear all these homophobic statements. There it's heartbeat as anger, a pounding, everything held within, muffled, tense. It beats, "Boom-boom," while you're hearing all this screaming and shouting, "Faggot, nigger, queer." During all this invective, you're getting this constant beat. It's a device but it's also a way of evoking that tension you feel when everything is constrained. When you don't speak out, the tension is just sort of there, just about to break the surface, held and not quite let go, always just barely there. Later the heartbeat becomes salvation, particularly when you get the chant and anger vented. When the heartbeat comes through that, it becomes almost a resolution. So you are looking your heartbeat as a source of life and then eventually a source of death, since entwined with its ticking is the virus, a source of death. I wanted to play with that paradox.

The ending was difficult because I wanted the tape to have a positive, glowing release. You've gotten through all this, glowing and concluding, "Yes, we can be black and gay and proud." Yet I wanted to return people to the risks. The risks obviously are personal for me in a very direct sense, but the images and sounds also hit risks in a metaphoric sense. This is a struggle; there is paradox within this struggle; the heartbeat is life but the heartbeat can also be death. So I was playing with the heartbeat as a device. I don't know if viewers intellectually think of it like that. It's okay if they don't; they feel the increasingly important meaning of the beat throughout. As a device, it is not redundant, just added there to keep things moving along, but rather it functions integrally like the music and the poetry.

CK: It coalesces at one point where the line is, "I discovered a time bomb ticking in my blood." The beat which you've been hearing all along is an echo of that line, and then it's very inspiring. Right after that we get into the putting together of the black men in the gay rights demonstration with civil rights demonstrations.

MR: ...and all of my heroes from the history, the minihistory. Travel through the centuries of black American history in twenty seconds!

CK: At the end, *Tongues Untied* brings together a lot of things, moving them out towards public demonstration. Up to that point we'd been in public space, but now there's a much more dramatic and open public drama and call to action.

MR: Unsympathetic viewers probably tune out long before, but if they stay to that point, it could make a lot of nationalists upset. To take our heroes and mix them in with a black gay rights march is totally repugnant and contradictory. How can you consider Frederick Jackson, and Harriet Tubman, and Sojourner Truth in the

same breath as gay men all marching down the street bare-chested? Obviously it makes perfect sense to me; from my vantage point that montage was absolutely necessary. I had to move my experience out of just the personal realm and make it a communal and public experience. But we also need to bring personal struggle into the political, social and cultural struggle. It's not sufficient to wage war just with the demons within but also with the demons outside. Part of the battle has been going on a long time. You understand that this is not something new, but that you're part of the struggle's continuum. You can draw resources and strength from previous battles won as well as lost, so you understand better what needs to be done to continue in the future. That was really important for me to say —not to remain personal and poetic but also to be hard edged and muscular in clarifying the connection between civil-rights black American struggles for over three centuries and what we're doing now as black gay men.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Monstrous trees and ecology: targeting human threats in the horror film

by Robin Murray and Joseph K. Heumann



Grandmother Willow tells Pocahontas to "listen to the spirits."



Computers show the deep roots of the Tree of Souls in *Avatar.*

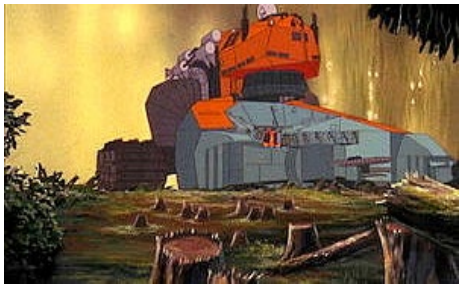
Myths from both East and West attribute the power of life to trees. Christians may decorate evergreen trees to celebrate Christmas, but these signs of the promise of spring resemble the sacred Yule Tree in Germanic mythology. In Hinduism and Buddhism, the Banyan and Peepal trees also serve as sacred trees evoking visions of eternal life. Representations of trees in literary works from Tolkien's White Tree of Gondor in *The Lord of the Rings* to dryads in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* reflect this traditional beneficence of trees. This life-giving mythology of trees continues in recent animated films from *Pocahontas* (1995) to *Avatar*. In *Pocahontas*, Grandmother Willow provides wise advice, telling Pocahontas,

> "All around you are spirits, child. They live in the earth, the water, the sky. If you listen, they will guide you."

When she talks to John Smith, Grandmother Willow's advice grows more direct and offers a way to encourage life over death:

> "Young man, sometimes the right path is not the easiest one. Don't you see? Only when the fighting stops, can you be together."

The Tree of Souls in *Avatar* (2009) looks like a willow and acts as the spiritual center of Pandora and its source for interconnection. Destroying the Tree of Souls may mean the end of Pandora and the Na'vi. Groves of trees take on the same spiritual force in *Fern Gully* (1992) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997), and as in *Avatar*, human exploitation threatens the forests' life-giving energy.



Monstrous humans destroy the rainforest in *Ferngully.*



Princess Mononoke protects the forest with help from its spirits.



Trees object when their apples are stolen in *The Wizard of Oz.*



The apple trees fight back against Dorothy under the wicked witch's spell.



Ents seek vengeance against Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers.*

Explorations of how trees transform into "monsters" seeking revenge against the human world that exploits them build on the powerful life-sustaining forces of sacred trees. The power of life attributed to trees seems like a precondition for trees being agents of wrath in resisting human degradation of the environment. The recent Zika Virus outbreak reinforces the dangers humans sometimes confront in wooded areas. With its origin in the Ugandan Zika Forest Preserve, the virus also connects trees with horrific repercussions, especially for infants and children. Although first discovered in 1947, the virus began infecting humans outside of Africa only in 2007, when it mutated to its current dangerous form. As researcher Alexander Haddow explains,

> "The current Zika virus outbreak in South and Central America is another wake-up call that increased globalization and climate change will continue to lead to the emergence of viral pathogens."

According to Haddow, "We need to be preparing for the next Zika virus now" (quoted in Swails and McKenzie). In the Age of the Anthropocene, trees like these seem ready to fight back against their human oppressors.

In films as diverse as *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (2002), trees have fought back against humans, becoming "monstrous nature." In *The Wizard of Oz*, trees become animated when their apples are stolen (and a wicked witch intervenes). And in the *The Twin Towers*, trees called Ents seek vengeance against Saruman (Christopher Lee) and his army when their leader Treebeard (John Rhys-Davies) sees a section of Fangorn Forest Saruman has decimated to feed his iron forges. Plant horror films such as *Severed: Forest of the Dead* (2005), *The Ruins* (2008), *Splinter* (2008), and *The Happening* (2008) again illustrate how trees might fight back against their human oppressors. But they also tackle contemporary environmental problems and offer biotic solutions that incorporate all the living things in an ecosystem Despite their mystical or supernatural elements, *The Ruins* and *Splinter* address eco-concerns based on human exploitation of the natural environment.With a focus on "fair use" economics, *The Ruins* cautions against humans infiltrating rainforests by drawing on plant horror, forest vines that trap and kill U.S. tourists trespassing on sacred Mayan land. In *Splinter*, alien "splinters" parasitically invade human carriers and turn them into monsters, a cataclysmic result that underpins the possible consequences of climate change, oil extraction, and exploitation of old growth forests. But *Splinter* also demonstrates how a biotic community of interdependent organisms advances survival.

By interrogating irresponsible science, *Severed* and *The Happening* more explicitly broach current eco-disasters and the biotic communities that might thwart them. In *Severed*, genetic testing in a remote island logging camp meant to accelerate tree growth and increase timber output also proves deadly to humans when splinters from GMO trees transform humans into zombies who feed on other loggers. Although the "outbreak" seems isolated, its presence in the film serves as a warning against both genetic modification and over-logging of forests condemned in recent news articles, like those highlighting the third annual International March Against Monsanto (2015). *The Happening* takes this cautionary tale even further, explicitly addressing two environmental issues: the disappearance of bees and plants' ability to attack deadly threats, including humanity. In both, success depends on community rather than selfish exploitation.



In *Severed: Forest of the Dead* trees transform humans into monsters.



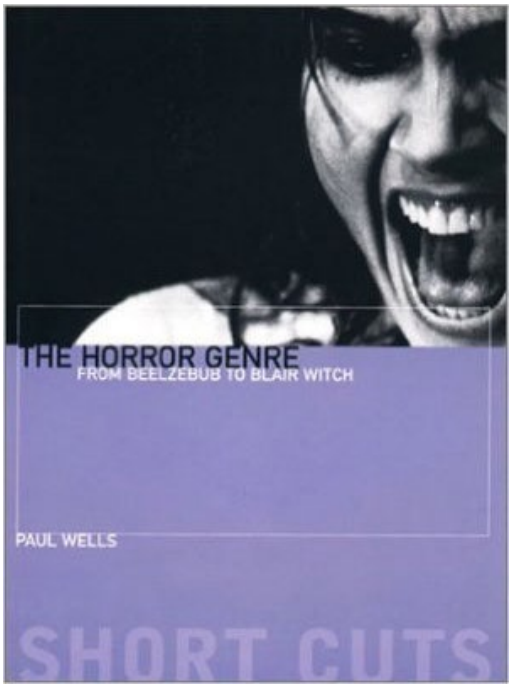
In *The Ruins*, vines fight back against human oppressors.



Splinter demonstrates how a communal approach may advance survival.



The Happening showcases family melodrama as alternative to selfish exploitation of the natural world.



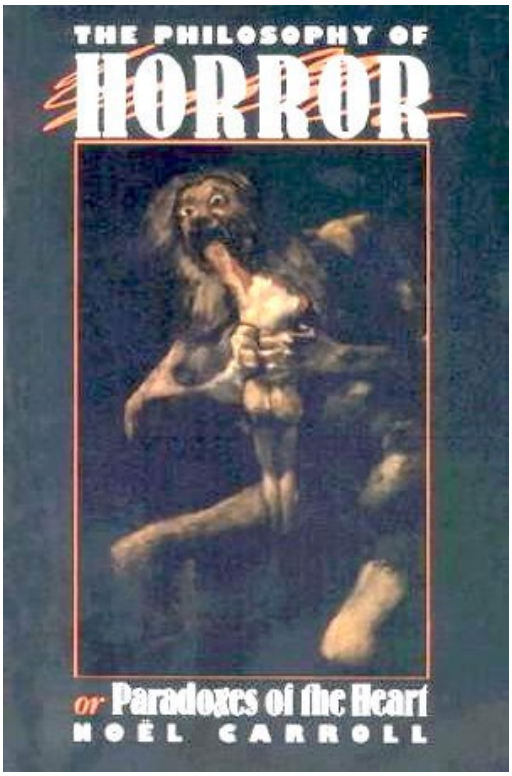
Paul Wells's *Horror Genre* connects horror with Marxism and evolutionary theory.

With their emphasis on evolution and natural monsters, horror film theorists Paul Wells (2000) and Noel Carroll (1990) address at least some of these environmental underpinnings. Wells takes an interdisciplinary approach to horror, asserting that, more than any other genre, horror film "has interrogated the deep-seated effects of change and responded to the newly determined grand narratives of social, scientific, and philosophical thought" (2000, pg. 1). Wells suggests the horror genre film responds to the philosophy of K. Marx as articulated in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and the theories of evolution espoused by C. Darwin in *On the Origin of the Species* (1859). For Wells, horror films draw on the class struggles of Marxist theory by "explor[ing] modes of social 'revolution" in which naturalized ideas about bourgeois orthodoxy are transgressed" (2000, pg. 4), as *in The Ruins* and *Splinter*. The genre also examines the repercussions of humanity's desire to challenge natural selection and "'artificially' impose itself upon the conditions of material existence, while nature slowly but surely, organically and often invisibly, changes the world" (2000, pg. 5), as in *Severed*. By applying class issues like those of Marx and Darwinian theories of evolution, tree horror illuminates elements of the genre espoused by Wells.

In his seminal *Philosophy of Horror*, N. Carroll (1990) also highlights the genre's connection with a disrupted natural world when he declares,

> "In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order" (16).

For Carroll, "horror involves essential reference to an entity, a monster, which

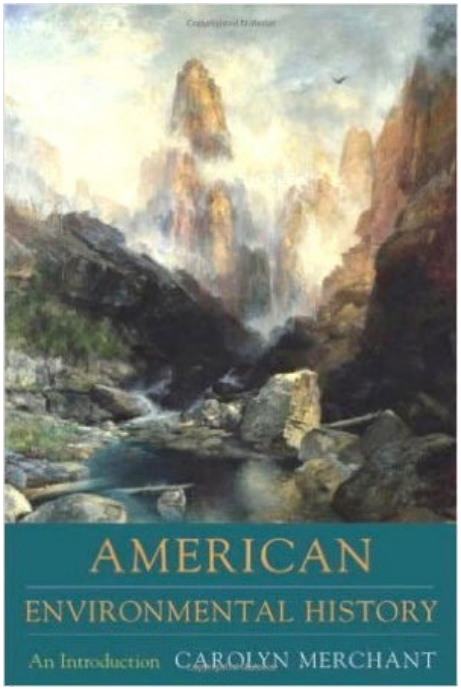


Noel Carroll's *Philosophy of Horror* connects horror with a disrupted nature.

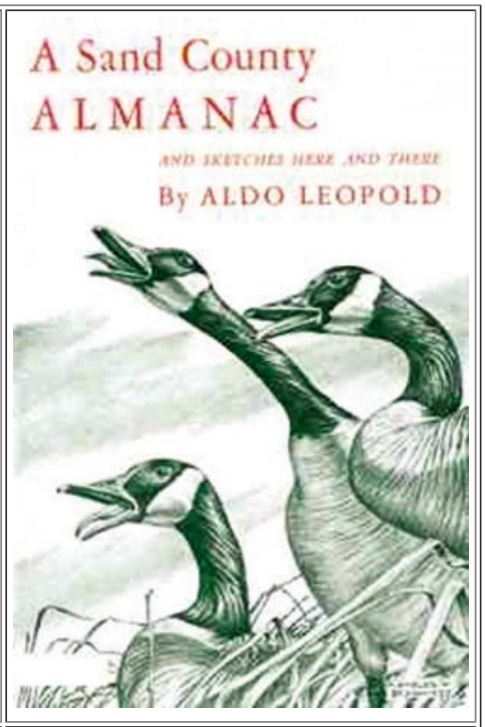


European and U.S. students celebrating spring break exploit natives at a resort in *The Ruins*.

then serves as a particular object of the emotion of art-horror" (1990, pg. 41). Tree horror is rooted in such a distressed natural world. The monsters created by trees in *Severed* and *Splinter* especially illustrate Carroll's claims.



Environmental historian Carolyn Merchant highlights ecological approaches that stress cooperation among individuals in animal and human communities.



Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic encourages a view of ecology and community that includes "soil, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."

Although useful starting points for environmental readings of tree horror films, the theories of Wells and Carroll have their limitations. A more complex ecocritical reading demonstrates two crucial points: The messages conveyed by tree horror films connect explicitly with current environmental issues. They also promote biotic community, an approach to ecology that stresses how both human and nonhuman nature flourish when they interact interdependently and cooperatively. As environmental historian Carolyn Merchant (2007) explains, such an approach to ecology highlights plant communities as living organisms that evolve through succession. A plant community is also vulnerable to disruption or death by technologies such as those that caused the Dust Bowl. To battle such disruption, the environment "strives for a nature of cooperation among individuals in animal and human communities" (Merchant, 2007, pg. 184). Ecologist Aldo Leopold applies this view to human communities in his manifesto, "The Land Ethic," which encourages an ecologically centered view of the land as a biotic pyramid in which humans are a part. As Leopold explains,

> "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land... [and] changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it" (pg. 203).

Severed: Forest of the Dead, *The Ruins*, *Splinter*, and *The Happening* address Leopold's ideal. In these plant horror films, humans survive only when they strive for cooperation with the natural world.

Tree horror driven by human exploitation of the natural environment



Bored with the resort, the vacationing students trek to a forbidden Mayan temple.



Mayans attempt to stop the thoughtless spring breakers from violating sacred ground.



Oblivious “colonizing” students wave and photograph the angry Mayans.

Set in and around a secret Mayan temple, *The Ruins* primarily cautions against disturbing ancient ruins, applying a standard horror film motif. But the juxtaposition of vacationing Westerners with native Mayans protecting and, when necessary, quarantining the site introduces a potentially environmental message: colonizers who exploit the environment and its indigenous populations may face dire consequences in the eco-horror film. As an adaptation of screenwriter Scott Smith’s novel, it may also draw on contemporary environmental concerns. *Entertainment Weekly*’s G. Flynn asserts,

> "Smith has tapped into our anxieties about global warming, lethal weather, supergerms—our collective fear that nature is finally fighting back—and given us a decidedly organic nightmare."

The Ruins also taps into some of the same fears Carter Soles (2014) broaches in his study of slasher films: “fears of environmental collapse, dwindling natural resources, and reprisals for their structural mistreatment of the working poor” (pg. 235). The focus on plant horror in *The Ruins* provides a way to globalize this fear.

The opening of *The Ruins* establishes a colonizer/colonized binary and introduces the film’s genre. Vines grow toward and grab a frantic woman as she cries beneath the ruins. A camera pan reveals the rainforest setting of the film. This greenery is broken by a poolside setting where students Jeff (Jonathan Tucker), Amy (Jena Malone), Stacy (Laura Ramsey), and Eric (Shawn Ashmore) celebrate spring break. A lost earring connects the American students with German tourist Mathias (Joe Anderson) and the ruins that open the film. Mathias invites them to join him and friend Dimitri (Dimitri Baveas) for a trek to this secret temple and, craving adventure, the four students agree. Their journey accelerates eco-conflicts that plant horror and its indigenous allies resolve.

The film first highlights how these students are colonizers unable to respond to the Mayans’ attempt to warn them about the deadly vines protecting the temple. Once the students make contact with the vines, Mayans surround them, halting their escape from the quarantined zone. The rest of the film focuses on these five students’ desperate and hopeless attempts to survive attacks from the Mayans and the sentient vines protecting the sacred ruins. Mathias is the first to go after breaking his back in the same pit where the woman in the film’s opening lost her life. Even though Jeff amputates his paralyzed legs when vines penetrate them, the monstrous plants consume Mathias. Stacy is next, when she drops into the pit and punctures her leg, which also becomes infected with vines. In agony, Stacy kills Eric and herself as if offering her body to the vines. During an escape attempt, the Mayans shoot Jeff, but Amy reaches the jeep and drives off. Her escape seems doomed, however, since a final shot shows vines moving beneath her skin. Here the film suggests a sort of “reverse colonization,” as violated nature turns the tables by infiltrating human borders and re-establishing the dominance of the vegetal. The film ends with more vacationers from the resort reaching the temple, continuing the horror.

	
Only the Mayan leader's gun convinces the students they must climb the temple once they violate its vines.	Vines infest Mathias's legs after he falls into the temple's pit.
	
Jeff amputates Mathias's legs to halt the vines invasion.	Stacy and Amy enter the vine-infested pit.
	
Stacy and Amy hear the vines mimicking their cellphone ring tones in the pit.	Infected by the vines, Stacy tries to cut them out, wounding and ultimately killing herself in the process.



Amy consoles Stacy before making her escape from the Mayans.

In *The Ruins* the rainforest and its indigenous inhabitants thwart the American and European students seeking to exploit them. In a symbolic gesture toward retribution, the film shows us what might happen if natre fought back against human oppressors who are unwilling to join the indigenous Mayans and become part of a biotic community. Instead, they have adopted an economic approach that encourages fair use politics that call for the exploitation of resources for human gain. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP 2015) highlights a few of the ways tourists exploit the environment, including commodification of cultural traditions and economic inequality. The tourists in *The Ruins* first highlight economic inequality in the typical resort area. When they choose to violate Mayan traditions, however, these spring-breakers ignite environmental disaster.

In reality, rainforest depletion has risen dramatically in the last year. A Rainforest Rescue (2015) campaign to save Mexican rainforests Los Chimalapas, home of the indigenous Zoque people, declares that after "a long history of defending their forest and its biodiversity against outsiders," the Zoque are losing ground to "loggers and cattle ranchers [who] are crowding in while politicians turn a blind eye." This degradation affects the world's largest rainforests in Mexico and Central and South America, a subject explored more effectively in documentaries such as *Alma* (2011)and *Green* (2012). Although some of the colonizers have changed, exploitation of indigenous people and the natural world continues. In *The Ruins*, plants and the people they sustain fight back.



Seth watches girlfriend Polly set up camp for their anniversary celebration in an old growth forest in *Splinter.*

Splinter focuses on at least one of the issues raised in *The Ruins*, the invasion of wild nature by outsiders. Unlike *The Ruins*, however, *Splinter* shows us what might happen if diverse groups cooperated instead of battling one another once the vines fracture the group. On the surface, however, the film highlights contemporary environmental issues: oil extraction and preservation of old growth forests. When Polly (Jill Wagner) and Seth (Paulo Costanzo) go camping to celebrate their anniversary, they disturb an Oklahoma old growth forest near a Mid-State Oil company experimental extraction field site despite a sign warning them to keep out and, perhaps, announcing the first eco-issue.

On the drive to a cheap motel after their tent collapses, Seth introduces the second environmental issue when he tells Polly the forest is nearly 400 years old. Because it "sucks for logging," it is untouched, leaving trees like a post oak that Seth declares is at least 300 years old. The couple encounters a more immediate danger, however, when they pick up two hitchhiking fugitives, Lacy (Rachel Kerbs) and Dennis Farrell (Shea Wigham) and run over an animal infested with a splintering parasite. These deadly splinters flatten one of their tires and wound Farrell's finger, heightening the film's conflict and, perhaps, suggesting plant nature is fighting back through both parasitic splinters and the animal victims they produce. As Sean Cubitt asserts (2015),



Parasitic splinters infest a gas station attendant.

> "What is remarkable about eco-horror is that often it voices the agony of what has no voice: animals ..., but even more so rock, earth, water and air, and suffering Gaia" (pg. 232).

Splinter gives trees and animals a voice, but the majority of the film focuses on how criminals and victims must join together to escape the tree horror these splinters represent. The opening of *Splinter* has already introduced the deadly road kill and the main setting of the film. In early scenes we see an infected varmint attack a bored gas station attendant (Charles Baker). Their accidental altercation with an infested beast forces the now mixed group to stop for help at the same gas station. Instead of a haven, though, the gas station reflects the insidious nature of "Big Oil" in modern industrialized societies and transforms into the site of their battle against the splintering fungus-like parasite. Lacy is the first victim when the attendant kills her, infecting her body with the parasite. Now only Farrell and the anniversary couple remain. To survive, they must work together, forming a symbolic biotic community that parallels the successful old-growth forest surrounding them.



Lacy's severed splinter-infested hand breaches the gas station where Seth, Polly, and fugitive Farrell seek shelter from the tree parasites.

Although *Splinter* primarily draws on the clichés of the creature feature, it also highlights the need for this biotic community, at least among disparate humans. When they work together, fugitive Farrell, "firecracker" Polly, and biology Ph.D. student Seth provide skills that ensure that at least two of them will survive. Seth's responses to Lacy's severed, mutated hand reveal his strengths. Seeing the animated hand transforms Seth into a "mad scientist" intrigued by the monster.



Farrell loses his own hand to the splinters.

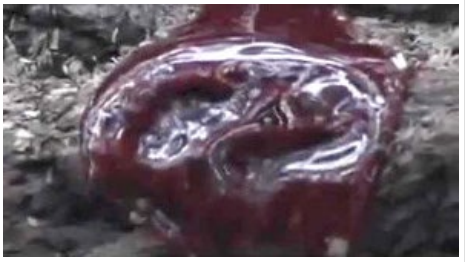
He watches it follow him and explains, “it’s metabolizing.” “It’s feeding.” It’s “digesting blood.” It’s “absorbing the nutrients on a cellular level.” He’s intrigued because he has “never seen anything like it.” Later he explains that the splinters are parasites that consume like a fungus or a mold.

Polly and Farrell reveal their strengths after they retreat to a back room and face a locked back door. Because the now dead attendant has the keys, Farrell advises Polly to remove door hinges with a screwdriver. Together they plan to burn the parasites and attract a fire department to the scene. Farrell goes for motor oil, but Polly leads him to the lighter fluid. When this effort fails, and the parasites get in, Farrell again saves Seth and Polly, leading them into the shop’s refrigerated area.

Seth draws on science once more when he lowers his body temperature to throw off the splinters. But it is Farrell and Polly’s more practical approach that saves them. Polly distracts the parasites with flares, shoots the splintered Lacy, and lures it into the flames. Farrell sacrifices himself for the innocent couple, blowing up the gas station and destroying the remaining splinters. Seth and Polly escape down a deserted road. But the last shots show old-growth trees covered with oozing splinters. The film leaves us with a couple of messages: if criminals and innocents work together, they are more likely to succeed, paralleling a biotic community in the natural world, and if humanity leaves an old-growth forest alone—and perhaps stops extracting oil—splintered plants grow dormant, no longer monsters but trees.



Seth, Polly and Farrell battle the splinter-infested monsters.



Genetically modified trees ooze deadly sap.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Tree horror and irresponsible science: the earth bites back



Loggers and environmental activists join forces to escape zombies created by GMO trees in *Severed*.



Zombie-fied loggers chase down human food.



The boss's son Tyler meets a GMO infected logger.

Severed: Forest of the Dead addresses the dangers of genetic experimentation, but it also highlights the need for communal action and a biotic community to overcome its repercussions. Overhead shots of a massive dense forest establish the setting and introduce the film's first conflict between environmental activists and loggers. Shots of protesting activists are juxtaposed with footage of loggers cutting down and preparing timber, illustrating the whole lumbering process from forest to truck to processing. Activists chain themselves to trees while loggers work. A banner shows us that these young environmentalists represent the Forest Action Committee. Their signs declare, "Greed will not clean our air" and argue against depleting natural resources. They shout at the loggers, "get out of our forest!"

Mac, the logger boss (Julian Christopher) at first confronts the environmentalists, warning his men to be careful because the protesters are too close. But he also opposes the company bosses for whom he works. When he sees two company research scientists taking samples from an enormous tree, he tells them to come down for "less talk and more chop." One of these researchers, Carter (J.R. Bourne), notices extra thick sap and announces, "Something isn't right… I've never seen this volume of sap before," but he tells Mac there's no cause for alarm instead of revealing its source: the company is testing GX1144, a new GMO product the company believes will accelerate growth and increase yields.

Tree horror is the result of these genetic experiments. When a logger cuts down the altered tree, the remaining trunk is covered with red sap that flows down its bark like blood. It oozes as the logger saws through the trunk. Activists have spiked the tree in protest. The chain saw hits the spike, sending it flying back. It slashes the logger. Mac calls for help, but the logger begins convulsing. His eyes turn red. He begins to growl and grab at the other loggers. He has turned into a viral zombie, a "natural" eco-zombie, according to S. J. Lauro (2011). For Lauro, the eco-zombie in *Severed* "incarnates anxieties regarding the abuses of the planet by capitalist industry" (pg. 61). The next scene confirms Lauro's claim. Lumber company corporate officers and board members discuss the success of GX1144. It has increased profits by 15%. Their goal is to expand the testing area for the genetically altered lumber until a secretary shares bad news about the logging camp. They have lost contact with the camp and blame the Forest Action Committee, led by Rita Hoffman (Sarah Lind). The logging camp is in the testing area, and if Hoffman finds out, it might draw undue attention to their GX1144 program.

To address the board's concerns, its members send the CEO's son Tyler (Paul Campbell) to the camp. Although representing the enemy, Tyler ultimately becomes part of a biotic community that also includes loggers and environmentalists. His entrance in the camp also shows us what happens when we disturb the natural order: monsters. When Tyler drives his truck off the ferry, the logging camp is deserted and in shambles. Undead loggers feed on corpses, but Tyler escapes into a forest and hides in a shed with unscathed logger Luke (Michael Teigen), environmental activist Rita, logging boss Mac and company



Zombies eradicate almost all of the camp's loggers.



Tyler tries but ultimately fails to defeat zombies created by GMO trees.

man Carter. Rita tells Tyler he has been "raping the earth" and the GMO-induced infection supports her claim. This secret GX1144 testing area must be quarantined to maintain stock prices, and their survival depends on collectively battling monstrous results of bad science.

The rest of the narrative focuses on the clashes with zombies that the loggers and environmental activists must face together. Rita, Tyler, and Mac form an unlikely alliance that shows the power of community. Carter is the weak link in their group, and ultimately nearly kills them all because he refuses to cooperate. He and the logging corporation usurp the power of the new community. The group's first attempt to escape is thwarted by the company men who block the bridge to town and through Carter's unwillingness to share blame. Carter reveals the problems with GX1144 only after Mac threatens him, arguing that he is the only one "who can end clear-cut logging." Carter and the company men also halt the group's second attempts to escape through a second logging camp. Company thugs shoot at the group from helicopters. Other loggers capture and hood them, taking them back to their camp. Led by Anderson (Patrick Gallagher), these loggers have created a more hostile community than Mac's. They threaten Rita and target zombies daily, ritually killing them in a carefully constructed gladiator arena. Carter sneaks away from the compound and deliberately leaves the gates to the prison open, so the remaining zombies attack, killing Mac, Carter, and Tyler. Rita escapes, reaching a road. The last shot shows Tyler's heartless father in his enormous mansion toasting his dead son.

Ultimately the message of this campy film makes legitimate claims. First of all, messing with nature through genetic experimentation can be dangerous. Although the science behind these genetically modified trees is highly exaggerated, it is based in fact. Botanists agree these genetically modified "transgenic" trees have the potential to both benefit and devastate the environment. In a University of British Columbia Terry Project report (2015), proponents argue, "Tree genomics has the potential to considerably improve the planting stock by reproducing desirable traits such as resistance to insects, extreme climates and herbicide or increasing the wood quantity and quality," especially in the Anthropocene Age This same report also notes concerns, asserting that transgenic trees may propagate gene flow and Superweeds:

> "Gene flow could create considerable species displacement and ecosystem disruption"

The report supports these concerns with examples from experimental plantings in China (Terry Project, 2015). In a briefing paper issued by the Global Justice Ecology Project (2015), Dr. D. Suzuki agrees, declaring transgenic trees have

> "the potential to transfer pollen for hundreds of miles carrying genes for traits including insect resistance, herbicide resistance, sterility and reduced lignin [supportive structural plant materials]."

These transgenic trees "have the potential to wreak ecological havoc throughout the world's national forests." Transgenic trees may not produce zombies, but they may "increase human exposure to hazardous chemicals" (Global Justice, 2015). *Severed* mayillustrates an extreme consequence of planting transgenic trees, but its horror themes are based in science.

If a GMO tree crisis occurs, however, the solution is communal rather than individual. Carter and the company are clearly painted as enemies in the film, as greedy exploiters of both human and nonhuman nature. Rita is also culpable in the infestation, since she and her environmental group spiked the tree that infected the logger. Because she alone survives, however, the film suggests her



"The Happening" halts Central Park strollers.



Science teacher Elliot Moore discusses bee colony collapse disorder with his students.



A Central Park visitor suddenly kills herself.



After "the happening," construction workers throw themselves off the top of a skyscraper.

crimes are minor compared to those of Carter and the company men who would let even their own children die. Ultimately, environmentalists must team up with at least some loggers to overcome the corrupt company battling them both.

The family drama *The Happening* also promotes a communal solution to irresponsible science. When humans kill bees with unbridled pesticide use, trees fight back, and the only escape is a nontraditional family that replicates biotic communities in nature. The opening introduces products of a disrupted nature: vanishing bees and sentient trees' ability to attack. Neurotoxins trees and other plants can emit are highlighted when those strolling in Central Park suddenly stop, repeat phrases they just stated, and kill themselves. It is 8:33 A.M. Philadelphia high school teacher Elliott Moore (Mark Wahlberg) introduces bee collapse disorder in the next scene when he asks his students why they think the bees are vanishing. A quotation from Einstein above his chalkboard reminds us of the dire ramifications of this crisis:

> "If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe then men would only have four years of life left."

Moore's class focus on the disappearance of bees draws on current theories addressing Colony Collapse Disorder explored in documentaries such as *Vanishing of the Bees* (2009) and highlighted by President Obama's 2015 initiative to preserve their habitats. There is no doubt that bee populations are decreasing rapidly and that their annihilation would have a devastating effect on agriculture.

The Happening highlights colony collapse disorder, but it also asks what if a monstrous nature fought back? As M. Pomerance (2010) asserts,

> "not civilization itself but what civilization has wrought upon the wilderness is what we must come to fear, since the wilderness is apparently now getting its own back" (pg. 214).

The film also provides a solution: a return to a biotic community in which humans no longer dominate. In *The Happening*, nature's answer comes almost immediately after Moore's bee discussion: as if reacting to our annihilation of the natural world, something from the trees in Central Park causes men and women to kill themselves. These juxtaposed scenes suggest humans have become a threat and must be defeated. At this point the two environmental scenarios merge. The vice principal (Alan Ruck) calls his teachers into the auditorium and tells them airborne chemical toxins have infected New York City, so they should

> "watch for warning signs. The first stage is confused speech. The second stage is physical disorientation, loss of direction. The third stage … is fatal."

Now Mr. Moore and the other teachers must dismiss their students and escape the attack.

The Happening primarily centers on more traditional narrative conflicts of science fiction and family melodrama. Sci fi moments occur when Moore and wife Alma (Zooey Deschanel) escape the infected city with friend and history teacher Julian (John Leguizamo) and his daughter Jess (Ashlyn Sanchez), facing multiple conflicts along the way. Family melodrama inspires Moore to lead Alma and Jess away from the chaos, rejuvenate his relationship with Alma, and analyze humanity's place in the natural world, laying the groundwork for a biotic community that can include Jess.



Elliot Moore and wife Alma escape New York with friend Julian and his daughter Jess.



Elliot, Alma, and Jess form a family after Julian leaves to find his wife.



A greenhouse owner explains plant intelligence to Elliot and Alma.



Each of these plotlines includes echoes of the environmental issues that opened the film. When their train is stranded in Filbert, Pennsylvania because conductors have lost all contact with the outside world, Julian leaves alone to find his wife. But Elliott, Alma, and Jess hitch a ride with a greenhouse owner (Frank Collison), who tells them plants caused the neurotoxin attack. “They can release chemicals,” he explains, as he talks soothingly to plants in his greenhouse. Trees and other plants “react to human stimulus; they've proved it in tests,” he declares. He even tells the Moores,

“Plants have the ability to target specific threats. Tobacco plants, when attacked by heliothis caterpillars, will send out a chemical attracting wasps to kill just those caterpillars. We don't know how plants obtain these abilities, they just evolve very rapidly.”

When Alma asks, “Which species is doing it, if you think it's true?” the nursery owner designates trees as the source of the human purge. He explains,

> “Plants have the ability to communicate with other species of plants. Trees can communicate with bushes, and bushes with grass, and everything in between.”

In *The Happening*, trees and the plants with which they communicate transform into monstrous nature to attack the human species seemingly bent on their destruction.

Despite this knowledge, people continue to respond to the neurotoxins and kill themselves. After picking up two boys, Elliot has a family of five to protect, so he must go further and apply the scientific method to the scenario. When Alma and the others ask him what to do, he decides to “be scientific” and “Identify the... rules... design the experiment... interpret the experimental pattern, [and] interpret.” When he asks himself, “What if it IS the plants?” answers emerge. Because an infected group was larger than theirs, and “this thing's been escalating all day,” he hypothesizes that

> “Smaller and smaller populations have been setting this off. They react to human stimulus. Maybe people are setting off the plants?”

Unable to help those already infected, Elliot asks Alma, “What if they're targeting us as threats?” and offers a solution:

> “This part of the field may not have been set off. Something in this field could be releasing the chemical into the air when there's too many of us together. Let's just stay ahead of the wind!”

Other conflicts highlight human exploitation of the natural world. The first house they enter for a rest is a model home for a new subdivision encroaching on the wilderness. Everything is plastic in the house, emphasizing its artificiality. “You deserve this,” states a billboard advertising the subdivision. Enormous coal cooling towers frame another house where a man shoots the two boys with a shotgun as they demand to be let in for shelter.

Although the last house is off the power grid, its owner Mrs. Jones (Betty Buckley) has shut herself off from everyone and everything and declares, “the world don’t care about me, so I don’t care about it.” Her anger seems to further stimulate the trees around her, so when she races out of the house after ordering Elliot to leave, she is immediately infected. Unlike the other victims, Mrs. Jones doesn’t just kill herself. She smashes her head into the windows of her home to let in the neurotoxins.

Elliot, Alma, and Jess encounter more suicides as they escape “the happening.”



Alma and Elliot’s reconciliation seems to facilitate their survival after “the happening.”

Both the science fiction and family melodramas now reach their climax. Elliot traps himself in a storage room to escape the toxins. Connected by a pipe to the springhouse where Alma and Jess play, Elliot hears them and warns them about the toxins. Instead of remaining inside, however, they all walk out to share what they think are their last moments. It is 9:58 A.M., and the episode has ended, connecting this vegetal assault with the terrorism of the 9/11 attack and its aftermath and perhaps suggesting the need for an environmental “alert system” like that used for national security. The film also suggests that Elliot, Alma, and Jess’s love for one another helped them survive. Three months later Jess prepares for the first day back at school. Alma checks a pregnancy test and is elated when it turns out positive. Although M. Pomerance (2010) claims “the family forms without joy,” (pg. 212), Elliot and Alma’s reactions suggest that their communal approach worked.

The family melodrama has resolved happily. But the sci fi conflict is enmeshed with unsolved environmental problems. An evolutionary scientist explains that neurotoxins in some plants and trees rapidly evolve their chemistry to attack threats in ways similar to the red tides in the ocean. The incident three months before was a warning, because “we have become a threat to this planet.” Although the last scenes show Alma smiling at Elliot and holding her pregnancy test, the scientist’s warning provides the parting frame for the film. Another neurotoxin incident occurs in a Paris park. And we see the three stages of infection before dark clouds like those that opened the film fly across the sky.

The science underpinning these plant attacks may be exaggerated for dramatic effect, but it is based in truth. Although trees may not have the abilities that the film attributes to them ,there is evidence that plants talk to each other on a basic level. J. Armstrong explains that plants communicate in rudimentary ways,

> “If you take a very broad definition of communication, which means any type of signal that is made by one organism that can be sensed by another” (McCarthy, 2008).

A plant like a rocket weed may even “recognize plants related to it” (McCarthy, 2008). S. A. Dudley argues such recognition “can increase their fitness by benefiting relatives” (McCarthy, 2008). Recognition highlights low levels of communication but also shows that plants have more sentience than usually expected of them.

Plants also have been shown to release toxins harmful to humans and other animals. Red tides, toxic algae along seashores each summer, are on the rise due to Anthropocene climate change, for example. E. Yong (2010) reports that tobacco leaves emit airborne chemicals to defend themselves against caterpillars. When mixed with caterpillar saliva, these chemicals attract caterpillar-killing big-eyed bugs or wasps. B. C. Freeman and G. A. Beattie (2008) highlight other ways plants defend themselves, including the emission of volatile gases. According to Freeman and Beattie,

> “Terpenoids (terpenes) occur in all plants and represent the largest class of secondary metabolites with over 22,000 compounds described. The simplest terpenoid is the hydrocarbon isoprene (C_5H_8), a volatile gas emitted during photosynthesis in large quantities by leaves that may protect cell membranes from damage caused by high temperature or light.”

Armstrong admits that trees have no need for such chemical defenses, but smaller plants with smaller populations do. As Armstrong asserts,

> "When getting eaten is a problem for smaller plants, that's a common situation where plants are toxic" (McCarthy, 2008).

This is a strategy that Monsanto and Syngenta utilize in GMO seeds. *The Happening* exaggerates the abilities of plants to make its environmental point. It's clear that humanity is destroying the Earth. Whether or not trees can fight back, though, is still under debate. To survive in such a world, however, humanity must join the biotic community rather than exploiting it for gain.

Tree horror is rooted in a disturbed natural world like that described by Carroll. But *The Ruins*, *Splinter*, *Severed*, and *The Happening* also address monstrous nature in relation with contemporary environmental issues. On the surface, *The Ruins* aligns with *Severed* because quarantines focus the plot of each film. *Severed* and *The Happening* offer the strongest indictments of humanity's treatment of the natural world. The warning against transgenic trees is powerful in *Severed*. And *The Happening* even more effectively cautions humanity to dramatically change its behavior because, as a scientist declares, "we have become a threat to this planet." *Severed*, *Splinter* and *The Happening* also demonstrate the power of a biotic community, at least among diverse humans. They embrace an organismic approach to ecology that encourages sustainability. When that biotic community is disrupted, the life of the planet is threatened. Tree horror films answer those threats with monstrous results.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Animal outlaws: capitalism, containment, and documentary activism

by Tess McClernon



A patron's video of the whale attack.



The camera drops due to the chaos of witnessing.



Image from seaworldcares.com – a website devoted to contradicting *Blackfish*

"Watching the video, knowing Orkid, your stomach drops because you know what's probably going to happen," explains John Hargrove, former trainer at SeaWorld, San Antonio, and subsequent best-selling author.[1] [open endnotes in new window] Shortly after Hargrove begins narrating the terrifying event unfolding onscreen, the idiom for embodied anticipation is literalized as the camera abruptly drops to the ground. The loss of our visibility heightens the chaos of witnessing, both for the videographer and now for us, viewers of *Blackfish* (Gabriela Cowperthwaite, 2013). What we are watching is a video inadvertently caught by a park patron of a near-death encounter between a SeaWorld trainer and two orcas (Orkid and Splash). The importance of this accidental video is two-fold: it foregrounds the deception practiced by marine park corporations and their ability to manipulate images to confirm their version of events. Indeed, the juxtaposition between worker testimonies and corporate rhetoric throughout the film is enlightening. Second, the video is an example of our position in relation to the documentary's interviewees—at this point in the film, we are aligned with the former employees and researchers, we no longer trust the sanitized spin proffered by SeaWorld. Though *Blackfish* is now known mostly for its success in shifting public opinion against animals in captivity for amusement and profit, its union of viewer with worker is equally disruptive. The documentary encourages a radical empathy that shifts blame away from low-wage workers and commoditized animals and back onto the corporations that exploit them.

On February 24th, 2010, Dawn Brancheau, a trainer at the SeaWorld park in Orlando, Florida was killed by Tilikum, a male orca with a documented history of aggression. Like many viewers around the nation, documentarist Gabriela Cowperthwaite found the news story both horrifying and incomprehensible.[2] The incident prompted her to investigate the tragedy, which necessitated looking into the systemic problem of animals as entertainment and profitable commodities. The documentary focuses on the potentially dangerous psychical repercussions of pod separation and captivity, and the consequences of covering up an orca's past transgressions. As we learn about the first marine parks in North America through to the latest incident at Sea World, Orlando, it becomes clear who/what are dispensable when maintaining a corporate veneer of safety and education.

Blackfish engages with activist discourse begun by other animal rights documentaries—particularly those concerned with captive cetaceans. *Blackfish* distinguishes itself from the others by its spectacular monetary returns,[3] its ubiquity on television and in movie theaters, and, most importantly for the sake of this essay, for incorporating a nuanced pro-worker perspective. Documentaries



Poster for the activist film *Lolita: a Slave to Entertainment* (2013)

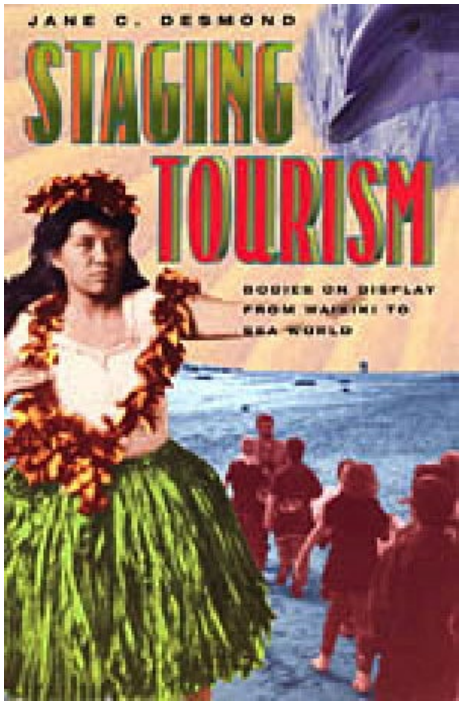


Poster for *The Whale* (*aka Saving Luna*, 2011)

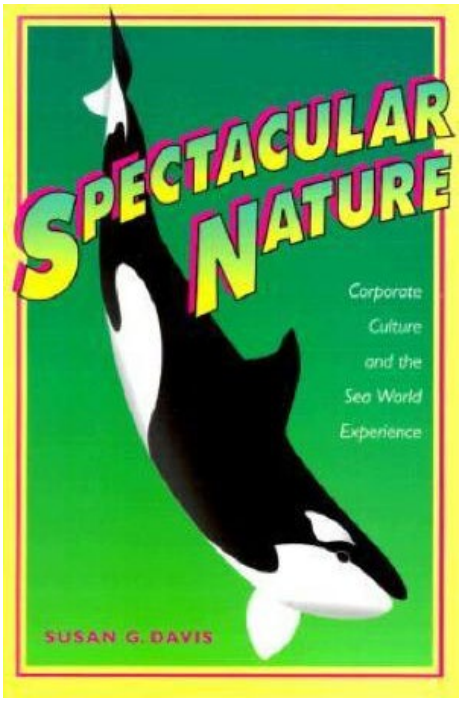
like *Lolita: A Slave to Entertainment* (Tim Gorski, 2003), *The Whale* (aka *Saving Luna*, Suzanne Chisholm and Michael Parfit, 2011), and *The Cove* (Louie Psihoyos, 2009),[4] resemble each other in their use of stock footage of cetaceans in the wild, interviews with those affected by the malpractice of marine parks, and several shared witnesses that testify to the dangers of captivity and the parks' "willing partner discourse"[5] (i.e. success in presenting the human and animal as working together). A lively activist spirit is effective and contagious in each of these films, which forces us to reckon with previously held beliefs about what constitutes animal abuse. Thus the patron video is an illuminating insight into the very thesis of *Blackfish*'s argument: unofficial modes of information, transmitted from those outside the corporate sphere, are to be relied upon when attempting to make sense of traumatic, almost always preventable,[6] catastrophes. Indeed the work of activist texts speaks to the continued necessity of documentary films and activism as an art practice.

Just like us

Among the handful of memoirs and exposés written on SeaWorld as a dangerous space for workers, animals, and patrons, are two critical book-length studies on the marine park: Susan Davis' *Spectacular Nature*, which examines SeaWorld as a corporate entity, and Jane Desmond's *Staging Tourism*. Desmond's work is a particularly formative text for those interested in analyzing SeaWorld from a critical cultural studies perspective. Though her book is about various types of tourism practiced by westerners, her examples range from Americans vacationing in Hawaii, as well as less traditionally exotic experiences that she calls "nature tourism"—marine parks, aquaria, and other sites that give the illusion of natural habitats.[7] She includes in her analysis circus-like events and other activities that require paid admission to witness animals on display or performing. The opportunities to temporarily visit an "other" (species, cultures, nature) are united by our insistence on witnessing tradition and nature no matter the mediated mode.



Jane Desmond's *Staging Tourism* is a formative text for the study of animal entertainment.



Susan Davis's *Spectacular Nature* explores the corporate structure of SeaWorld.

For Desmond, human and animal bodies *perform* tourism, thus she is cognizant of the similarities between animals on display and their human analogs. Though SeaWorld disavows the labor of its employees—whale shows are presented as great fun, a collaborative encounter between two willing participants unites its human patrons and mammals on display through a family-friendly rhetoric. The animals are like us—they have family units, they are gendered,[8] in heteronormative relationships, and produce offspring. The visual and cultural signifiers of family entice patrons to anthropomorphize the mammals, to see ourselves in them, thus rendering the tourism of species less radical than it would appear. The family friendly rhetoric not only effaces the labor of the trainers, it also successfully shields patrons from what would normally be considered an ecstatic, sublime experience—being up close to orcas. *Blackfish* contradicts SeaWorld's self-promotion and the false sense of security we may feel from commodifying animals through expert testimony and interviews with researchers (many of whom explicitly state their unwillingness to approach orcas in the wild and insist on observing boundaries). Like other forms of tourism, however, the whale shows, or the parks more broadly, become a seemingly safe place for us to project our ideologies onto an "other."



SeaWorld ad in response to backlash from *Blackfish* (found on thedodo.com)



They are just like us.

According to Desmond, then, an implicit bargain is struck between patrons and the SeaWorld corporation: we disavow the corruption that undergirds the spectacle and simultaneously accept their claims that differences between animals and humans are minimal. SeaWorld both capitalizes on a specific demographic as well as encourages their cyclical return.[9] The consumers that typically patronize SeaWorld are straight, middle- to upper-class families.[10] Neutralizing the difference in speciesism, SeaWorld suggests that the relationships between their customers and the animals, as well as between their trainers and the animals, and even among the animals, resemble a nuclear unit, much like the consumers themselves. As *Blackfish*, Desmond, and those interviewed for the documentary attest, this vision of nuclear harmony disavows the practice of pod separation and what we know about their social structures in the wild. According to researchers, orcas are matriarchal, their calves mature and remain close to their pod for their



This “Dine with Shamu” advertisement reveals SeaWorld’s demographic: nuclear, upper-middle class families.



Looking back at us.



Famous image from *Free Willy* (1993).

entire lives, and they thrive on these relationships. *Blackfish* stresses the incongruity of corporate presentation and lived experience by the orcas through loss as a thematic concern—it is not just the performances or the uncomfortable tanks, but the loss of communication and ability to partake in familial relationships typical in the wild.

Tilikum, Luna, and Willy: animals as entertainment

> “*Teaching a killer whale to swim with a human being and do tricks in exchange for food was invented on the Seattle waterfront in 1965.*”[11]

The history of animals as entertainment is rife with slaughter, confinement, monetary profit, and exploitation. In John Berger’s seminal essay, “Why Look at Animals?” he briefly sketches an extensive history of how we look at and relate to animals.[12] Drawing on a varied sample of artistic representations, the modern institutionalization with the onset of zoos, and their current status as commodity or entertainment, his article stresses the parallelism between the ubiquity of animal imagery and their subsequent disappearance from human life. Berger views our present-day engagement an unfortunate moment between humans and animals, who once played a great role in our lives either through myth, or later, husbandry.[13] For Berger, the animal behind the cage—or the orca in the tank—is “rendered absolutely marginal.”[14] When we look at animals, do we efface their observations of us?

As Berger stresses, part of our engagement with animals, especially in the last two hundred years, includes observation—we like to look at animals. Peppered throughout his analysis are examples of animals as represented through different media. Indeed, when we take a moment to reflect, some of our knowledge of orca behavior comes from popular forms of entertainment—specifically, cinema. Culturally, we do not think of killer whales (or any mammal from the dolphin family) as posing a danger to our well-being. Consider the popular fictional representation of an orca in *Free Willy* (Wincer, 1993), a formative text for our perception of large marine mammals. *Free Willy* exposes the dual role of cinema in the study of animals: movies in which they are featured, and movies as an activist method (both of which mirror the great cinematic binary: documentary and fictional modes of filmmaking).

Free Willy is a peculiar case study, so effective it eventually led to the actual freeing of its orca star.[15] On quite the opposite end of the spectrum is *Orca* (1977), a shameless imitation of *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975). The snippet included in *Blackfish* serves as the single humorous moment, as *Orca* longs to scare us by replacing a man-eating shark with an orca. Following in the success of *Flipper*—the television show starring a dolphin—the attempted terror of *Orca* is all the sillier. While *Free Willy* caters to our ideas about orcas (and dolphins) as dog-like and not known to inspire fear in humans, we have not completely invented our notions about orcas. Historical records attest to the demeanor we attribute to them, too. A researcher interviewed in *Blackfish* states that there are no recorded incidents of an orca attacking a human in the wild. Carl Safina’s recent book on the emotional lives of whales, among other mammals, *Beyond Words* (2015), relates a scene of small boaters being left in peace by the orcas of Puget Bay—it seems we scare them more than they should scare us (Safina informs us that at one point marine researchers considered calling them “panda whales”).[16] Yet, in *The Whale* the eponymous orca, Luna, is killed by humans, and *Blackfish* details the horror of human life taken by a cetacean.[17] Both documentaries testify to preventable disasters, as well as the (inevitable) heartbreak of fraternizing with a species we know little about.





Jaws (1975)….and *Orca* (1977) a revenge-seeking killer.

Animal Planet™



Animal Planet celebrates twenty years of animals on television. Instead of educating us about climate change, disappearing habitats, and endangered species, Animal Planet is another platform for animals to serve as entertainment.

SeaWorld promises us that orcas live longer, better cared for lives. It's patently false advertising.

We could deduce that twenty-four hour access to "reality" animal programs or modern wildlife documentaries would expose us to disappearing habitats, or at the very least, provide an education on various species. To be sure, the presence of animals on television is not a new phenomenon (in fact, the Animal Planet cable network celebrates its 20th anniversary this year), but as Jan Christopher Horak elaborates in an article on animal television programs, we may in fact experience the *opposite* of enlightenment via exposure, or something like desensitization to the plight of our planet's species.[18] Like Berger, Horak senses that the more present animals are in visual culture, the less we experience them in our daily lives. As animals have participated in cinema since its inception—the Muybridge experiments—we, and Horak, ask whether we have normalized animals. Do SeaWorld commercials and advertisements represent what we are comfortable with (animals in captivity for profit)? If their ads are part of a larger visual cacophony, then we need activist texts like *Blackfish* to shout through the noise. As *Blackfish* attests and then debunks, SeaWorld promises us that the orcas are living longer, happier lives in captivity compared to the wild. The following section illustrates the power of family-friendly rhetoric and the ramifications of decades-long captivity.

Case study on Lolita, the loneliest whale on the planet

Before *Flipper* undoubtedly influenced our cultural beliefs about (and affection for) cetaceans in the 1960s, Americans had been exposed to the display of marine mammals for at least a century. In Boston during the 1860s, the Aquarial Gardens introduced patrons to a Beluga whale and a porpoise; this was followed by



Older SeaWorld Orlando commerciall.



Iconic photograph from the Penn Cove Massacre in 1970.



Lolita's tank is hardly bigger than a standard hotel pool.

dolphin training in Florida in the 1930s. Marineland in California and Seaquarium in Florida were prototypical entertainment spaces, which ushered in SeaWorld, San Diego in the 1960s.[20] After ascertaining the financial gain from commodifying orcas, a particularly harrowing moment in the history of whale capture occurred in Penn Cove, August 8th, 1970. Approximately 80 whales were captured, many died and were subsequently sunk (though they washed ashore and became public knowledge), and seven calves "were lassoed, harnessed, and lifted out of Penn Cove…They were sold for a reported $20,000 each to marine parks in Texas, Japan, Australia, Miami, and England."[21] Images from this massacre appear in many documentaries and television specials on marine mammals. In fact, one of the men present that day is an interviewee in both *Blackfish* and *Lolita*—he tearfully confesses it was "the worst thing" he has ever done. He claims the sounds the whales emitted while being separated was the catalyst for his understanding the depth of the cruelty inflicted by trappers and the corporations that employed them. The trauma of that single event continues to reverberate today with lethal ramifications for many marine park trainers across the world—several of those captured in Penn Cove have sired calves or are still working in parks.

One of the seven "lassoed calves" was Lolita. *Lolita: A Slave to Entertainment*, an activist work, created by animal rights advocates with backgrounds in art and filmmaking, a d was screened at many film festivals in an effort to call attention to the reality of Lolita's condition. In order to shed light on what was then a three decades-long situation,[22] they had to expose the conditions in which she lives and affectively suggest her suffering. Her tank, according to the film (which is substantiated by other sources, as well as their own investigative research into the park), is hardly bigger than a standard hotel swimming pool. The film cleverly conveys a growing sense of claustrophobia, which speaks to the condition of captivity more extensively, especially if we consider other large mammals, like elephants in zoos, for example. With the use of animated graphs and conflicting quotes from the owner of Miami Seaquarium, the film creates an embodied experience; our physical discomfort is a testament to the power of *Lolita*'s images, as well as the catastrophe that is Lolita's life. A gnawing sense of urgency to release her—the aim for the filmmakers and activists—is evoked through repeated visual reminders of her confinement. We see her listless body float through the water slowly, shots of audiences sitting above the length of the tank, which emphasizes the lack of shade and width of the small pool, and we learn about the horrifying fate of her "husband" Hugo.

Lolita informs us that after the Miami Seaquarium obtained Lolita, she was placed with a male orca, the first captured whale on the East Coast.[22] Hugo and Lolita were made to perform together as "husband and wife"—her name purposefully sexualized to connote her relationship to an older, male whale (à la the pubescent love of Humbert Humbert). Hugo, however, displayed signs of severe depression and at one point attempted to ram his way out of their tank. Though he broke through the wall, he was unsuccessful in escape. A few years later he tried the same thing—repeatedly ramming his head into the wall of their tank. He killed himself—researchers and the filmmaker assert that it was a suicidal act. To support what initially seems like a hyperbolic assessment—not to mention the kind of human intelligence it attributes to the orca—the filmmaker



Ric O'Barry, activist and former trainer.



"They aren't your whales." The bond between trainers and orcas.



Dawn Brancheau and Tilikum in a collaborative performance.

interviewed Ric O'Barry (the former *Flipper* trainer). Part of O'Barry's transformation from trainer to activist, he states, was caused by a similar suicide of a dolphin—she refused to come up for air, essentially asphyxiating herself. Hugo's death is an unfortunate metaphor for the desire to escape—he breaks the barrier to kill himself rather than continue living in the tank and under oppressive conditions. The familial assignations by the marine parks are morbid reminders of what is now lost for captive orcas and the forced interactions they must endure for sustenance.

The labor of performance

The labor of the daily performances warrants serious consideration and both Desmond and *Blackfish* investigate its procedures. Part of the job of a trainer means daily interaction with the orcas. The bonds formed with whales are a particular focus in *Blackfish* and it includes statements from former trainers about the cruelty of separating the orcas from *them*, too.[24] And as orcas are affectionate and seek attention from humans, the trainers necessarily become invested in the fates of their companions.

SeaWorld offers four shows daily, each with a loose routine.Desmond describes it as structured improvisation stating that

> "the necessity for structured improvisation is not just to keep the trainers interested. If the whales become accustomed to pre-set routines which are then interrupted for any reason, they become belligerent."[25]

In order to project easy cooperation, they use "intermitted reinforcement," i.e. economic reasoning applied to an animal—the incentive-based perform-then-feed reward system. These methods are part of the larger system of rewarding the performing cetaceans with food. If the routine is too rigid, a slight mistake could throw the whales into a panic—it might mean no food. This looser style fortifies an illusory control over the animals, and yet it still puts the trainers and whales at risk for violence, hence Brancheau's death.[26] For the performances and whale ballets to run smoothly requires mutual cooperation (and many of the trainers mistake this cooperation for genuine affection, as they testify in these activist documentaries).

In both her article and book-length study, Desmond writes about the *punctum* for her during the whale and trainer performance.[27] The whale shoots out of the water with the trainer on its rostrum, both having swum deeply in order to gain momentum. Indeed, it is the *first* instance, not the second, that Desmond recalls as special, given its surprise to her—the second rendition is preceded by the trainers calling out to the audience to get their cameras "ready" for the trick is performed again to be recorded by patrons.[28] For this viewer, however, the *punctum* is a split-second microcosm that contains the long and shameful history of imposing capitalist systems on animals in captivity, as Tilikum urgently waves to the audience.[29] *Blackfish* includes the last few minutes of Brancheau's life, as

she tries to get Tilikum to perform for food.



The *punctum* for Desmond.



The *punctum* for the author: Tilikum's desperate attempt to "earn" food.

He performs the trick asked (to go around and perform a "pectoral wave"—the whale swims sideways, lifts his right flipper and looks like he is waving to the audience near him), but he does not hear the whistle that signals him to stop, and goes all the way around the pool waving, essentially bungling the trick. Tilikum's desperation, his almost manic drive to complete another trick, is caused by his hunger and his knowledge that the time for food is almost up (according to one trainer reviewing the footage, the orcas know when feeding is almost over because they can taste the saltiness of the water, and hear the ice cubes jangling in the near-empty bucket of fish).



Jeff Andrews, SeaWorld expert witness: "Tilikum is not an agressive killer whale....The only thing that led to this event was a mistate made by Ms. Brancheau." SeaWorld knows best.

Within this brief moment, Brancheau's fate is sealed, as is Tilikum's. Despite SeaWorld's cowardly public-relations spin on Brancheau's death—her ponytail was too long (and thus proved too tempting to the whale?)—many believe Tilikum snapped after a long day of frustration, rebellion, and hunger.Yet, the adherence to protocol killed her—when Tilikum returns to Brancheau, she displays no emotion and does not offer him any fish, both techniques are used to convey the trainer's displeasure to the orca. Disallowing trainer flexibility in any given situation is corporate hubris, which results in the deaths and physical impairment of laborers and animals. Rigidity is lethal for those not part of the corporate sphere that enforces it.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

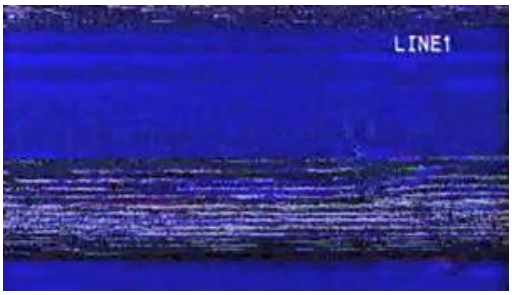
Containing the uncontainable



Terrifying incident in which the trainer survived.



James Earl Jones guides trainers through this introductory video.



Warped and decayed evidence.

The thematic and formal exploration of containment is prominent in several animal activist works. To challenge SeaWorld's sloganeering about safety within their marine parks, *Blackfish* accentuates the fleeting and the contingent—it purposefully emphasizes accidents and revealing mistakes like the inclusion of Brancheau's last hour and the patron video discussed earlier. Cowperthwaite and crew display images we are not meant to see: images of the tanks, archival footage, and home movies shot by patrons on cellphone or consumer video camcorders. They recycle images from now-forgotten television news sources, repositioning the context to underscore the trauma of these incidents. SeaWorld subjects employees to a lethal game of chance—we see footage of a trainer hauled under water by an angry orca—an incident that lasted for several terrifying minutes. The videos taken by spectators convey a perspective that news sources will not and often cannot capture. During these moments in *Blackfish*,we are helpless, inactive, and incapable of stopping what we see. Our place resides with the witnesses, a disruptive and passive position for us.

Through its formal structure, *Blackfish* puts forth the possibility of lax hiring practices by the corporation, and that the training the employees receive fails to prepare them to "train" orcas. Through unstated means, the *Blackfish* crew obtained old training videos for employees and trainers. Magnetic decay and its agedness connote that the documentary's use of the footage may not be sanctioned, and offers a glimpse behind machinations we are not supposed to see. By conjecture alone, we can imagine one of the former employees turned activists electing to share this material with the creators of *Blackfish*. SeaWorld often unwittingly incriminates itself in an effort to publicly defend its business practices and protocols,[30][open endnotes in new window] and the tapes prove to be no exception. The explanatory videos gloss over the lethal and near-death incidents of the past, they perpetuate faulty knowledge about cetaceans in captivity, and they project a veneer of corporate inclusion with special attention to the safety and happiness of their employees—it is another instance of bombastic family-friendliness.

An extreme juxtaposition between the more official footage, like the decaying videotape welcoming employees to SeaWorld, and the patron videotape described earlier resemble in aesthetic and content much of what comprises *Blackfish*—personal videos, surveillance footage, and images captured by cameras in the orca tanks. While the film shifts between official and unofficial footage, we also oscillate between two documentary gazes: accidental and helpless. For Bill Nichols, the accidental gaze veers dangerously close to a type of gawking, as "it depends on an ethics of curiosity for its duration."[31] However, the videographer starts out filming a charming encounter between an off-duty trainer and two orcas.[32] The blurriness between gazes attests to the intricacies of home video, of filming in hyper-official spaces, and capturing images that do not conform to a mediated corporate story. Thus, part of the importance of relying on nonofficial images and potentially illicit videotapes is precisely the lack of premeditation, which often reveals violence, unpredictability, and the failure of protocol and food deprivation. The images reveal a gray area, or the type of blurriness SeaWorld disavows: we are made aware that protocol cannot replace flexibility, that corporate policies defy freedom, and that profit triumphs at the expense of human



Transportation to another park.

and animal life. Part of what makes these moments frightening is the piercing break with the planned and structured. The routinized environment SeaWorld promises us upon entrance shatters.

Blackfish also figuratively breaks the tanks that contain the orcas, as their bodily oppression is revealed through a repetition of interjected images of the transportation of orcas from their natural habitat to alien exhibition spaces. Several quick sequences—seemingly taken from local news sources, as they are presented in small, digestible formats—reveal helicopters carrying whales in stretchers, and then slowly lowering them into cages for transportation. Predictably, the reporters seem less concerned with stopping what they witness and more interested in reporting it as an interesting fact—Florida just received a new orca, for example. Nightly news reports cannot contribute to resistance, as the format is integrated into a capitalist circuit in its aim for ratings and profit. Rather, news sources normalize what could be radical (and disturbing) images within a context of anticipation for a visit to the marine park that houses the orca. *Blackfish* defies this style of reportage by rejecting sanitized framing—when displaced from the narrative of nightly news, the images are once more unsettling and reveal a much different story.



Nightly news report.



Stock footage of orcas in their natural habitat.

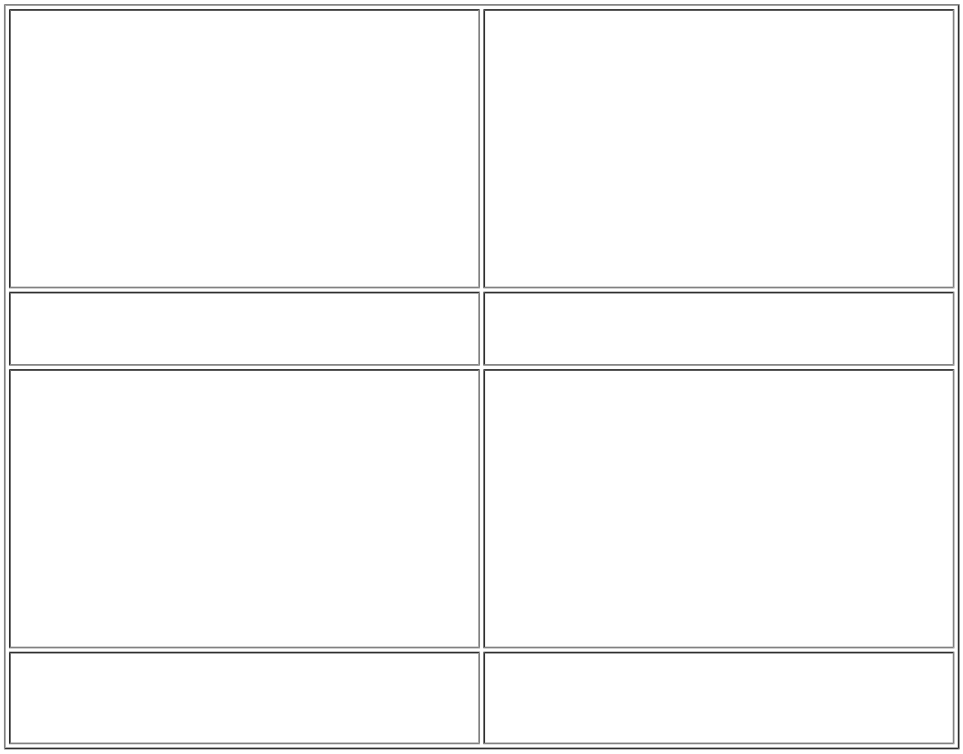


Dorsal fins collapse in captivity.



Index of the Penn Cove trauma.

Removed from the framework of reportage, we are asked to consider what we see—orcas being displaced from their natural habitats. *Blackfish* repeatedly includes images taken next to a tank, or within it, forcing us to contemplate their narrow confines. Their new home environments—the tanks at marine parks—are often intercut with stock footage of orcas swimming in formation in the ocean. This footage is also used in other activist documentaries and television specials to contrast the majesty of their existence with the criminal size of their cells. In the stock footage their dorsal fins stand upright, which signals the bodily harm done to orcas in captivity. The researchers in *Blackfish* explain to viewers that the orcas' fins are always collapsed in captivity because they can no longer swim as fast or as far as they do in the wild. Their collapsed dorsal fins index the trauma of the original event—the Penn Cove massacre—as well as the continued practice of illegal capture and breeding.



We would not be able to enjoy the controlled environment of marine parks if they were not set so far apart from our reality—in the case analyzed by Desmond, the urban space of San Diego. Buffered by “acres of parking, a long winding access route, and an undeveloped belt of greenery, SeaWorld is similarly psychologically set apart.”[33] A beautifully assembled and manicured park, this world unto itself eradicates the threat of violence the same way that it choreographs copasetic duets between animals and humans for the daily performances. Part of *Blackfish*’s or *Lolita*’s radical intervention includes breaking through these barriers—like Russ Rector’s backdoor entrance to Miami Seaquarium, an event I will return to later. *Blackfish* sets its focus on the subterranean, normally opaque systemization

(and labyrinthine history) of the park. Desmond describes the experience as satisfying a nostalgia for an "Edenic community," structured like an ideal small town. However, the longing for a picturesque, Reagan-era ideal is, in itself, a fantasy. Because it never existed, what we experience at SeaWorld (and perhaps at Disney parks, too) is a false promise, that the past we have invented will somehow return in the future. The marine parks and amusement spaces produce a reactionary vision, and they propose a utopia built on other impossible (and suspicious) fantasies.



EPCOT center in Orlando, Florida.

This vision of the world in miniature is part of a legacy of curious capitalist spaces, some of which originate from cinema: the Disney empire echoes the illusionist quality of cinema and emerged from animation film. Film theorists and Marxist scholars have, for some time, given thought to capitalist constructions that obscure reality outside their confines. Indeed, both modernist and postmodernist facades are or were erected in the name of classist isolation. Fredric Jameson's description of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles echoes the artificiality of SeaWorld. For Jameson, the luxury hotel is an embodiment of a certain kind of postmodern attempt to build a self-enclosed city within the hotel space. It purposely disavows the poverty and historical remnants encircling its edifice.[34] Likewise, Sea World, San Diego, erases "urban components like crime, dirt, pollution, noise, and different groups of people with competing needs."[35] Concurrently ignoring needs outside, within its walls invisible workers are part of a system hidden from them. Alexander Wilson's 1994 study of the Disneyland site in California, as well as the EPCOT Center in Orlando, Florida (a city built around peculiar pseudo-city spaces, as it also houses the other major SeaWorld), uncovers an elaborate system beneath the parks.[36-37] And apparently, at the entrance to SeaWorld, consumers are greeted with a sign that reads: SeaWorld is "not just another park, it's another world."[38]



Distraction.

Distraction is key toward redirecting our attention away from the realities of an amusement park. However, *Blackfish* picks up on the panoply of screens and lingers on the frames within frames inside the park—specifically, on the platform where the trainers perform. Huge screens are mounted above the trainers and used to enhance the view for those with poor seats. The screens display the action on the stage, with the trainers interacting with the whales. These screens are not merely digital binoculars for the audience, as they are placed throughout to perpetuate constant distraction. Audiences are left with no time to contemplate the spectacle before them. The exhibition/performance space secures isolation from the outside world.

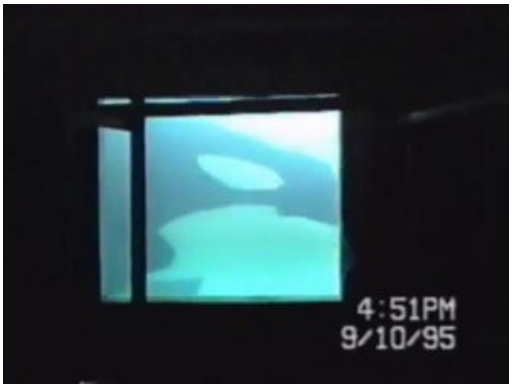


Surveillance.

The performances are a crucial component to the utopia SeaWorld purports to offer, as they physically and visually embody the union of human and sea mammal. The whale ballets solidify the notion of animal/human harmony and encourage a disavowal of species. The trainers and whales perform incredible feats in *unison*, sutured together as the perfect, symbiotic team. Their mutual happiness is declared over the loud speaker. In much the same way that the park models itself on and esteems the heteronormative, nuclear family, the whale ballets "in terms of timing, visual focus, and sound score underline the concept of loving partners that frames the traditional heterosexual ballet duet."[39] Incredibly, the trainers and workers performing wholly unnatural feats goes unremarked. The audience and emcee openly marvel at the tricks, yet, taken out of context, or when given serious thought, the feats become absurd, surreal moments. The screens in *Blackfish* remind us of how we are sold this delusion, and of the distraction necessary to induce a forgetfulness or lack of awareness about the reality of the performances. The construction of these activist documentaries, and their reliance on nonprofessional imagery and accidental inclusions, as well as the activist impulse of its subjects contradicts the illusion of pleasant orca and human interactions.



Russ Rector trespasses.



Within the crumbling infrastructure is another screen (Lolita swims by).



"SeaWorld SUCKS."

A more literal example of dismantling barriers is Russ Rector's "break in." Tim Gorski interviewed Rector for *Lolita* and Rector broke into the Miami Seaquarium in order to illegally film and document images of Lolita's tank. What these images reveal is also sadly symbolic of marine parks generally. The tank is leaking, pipes are exposed, and signs warning of high voltage all signify a failure to contain. Despite efforts to suppress the violence of Lolita's situation, the surface structure reveals a different story—one that not only risks Lolita's life, but puts the patrons and many children in danger of harm should the structure collapse.

Both films mitigate the stridency of the image offered by the sea parks and confirm Desmond's analysis. We arrive at a grayer area after watching the activist documentaries, chiefly because of their sympathy for *both* laborers and orcas (it is a murky space much like that provided by the unofficial footage). Desmond sees the harmonious union of orca and human as an impossible utopian dream, and SeaWorld and Miami Seaquarium erase all differences between species in the name of positive family mottos. However, we need not adopt either an increased form of speciesism or a whole-hearted denial of difference. Rather, and the films support this position, we need more fluid, dialectical perspectives that recognize the animals as different (but not separate), deserving our respect, not our domination. Exploitation in all its manifestations—including trainers and employees of marine parks—is given due attention and *Blackfish* necessarily advocates for the consideration of laborers and animals.

And…Action!

A few months after the release of *Blackfish* in both theatres and on television, vandals climbed on top of a freeway sign in San Diego, California, and painted over an exit for SeaWorld so it read "Sea World Sucks" (instead of Sea World Drive). [40] Of the actions taken since the documentary's release, this is by far the most amusing form of protest. Considering its target—a major corporation with ties to equally powerful corporate sponsors—activists against SeaWorld take risks when they openly defy the marine park. Tim Zimmermann, producer and co-writer of the documentary, would classify this act as part of the "*Blackfish* effect."[41] The *Blackfish* effect refers to how the documentary has inspired action, a phenomenon which includes everything from celebrity endorsements on social media to publicize their support, patrons avoiding or leaving SeaWorld parks earlier than planned, school programs and children writing letters or coloring pictures in favor of the documentary's message, activists protesting outside the entrances, and sponsors being encouraged to cut ties with SeaWorld. These examples and others perpetuate a new cultural attitude toward the use of animals for amusement purposes and keeping them in captivity. Though it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which *Blackfish* has altered public awareness, the legible effects may perpetuate its legacy for years to come. Consider that the children across the U.S. who were moved enough to publicly display their support will eventually grow up—it's possible that activist art will play a crucial role in the abolition of amusement spaces that financially benefit from animals. *Blackfish* is a filmic example of a text that can transcend its production history and can guide us through scholarship on the idea of activist works.

As of October 2013, *Blackfish* had grossed a little over two million dollars. Its anomalous financial return and distribution through several different viewing platforms set *Blackfish* apart from most documentaries, let alone explicitly activist works. With its financial success and mainstream appeal, how then do we locate *Blackfish* within the tradition of "committed" cinema?[42] Can we think of it as activist in the same sense as *Lolita*? For his essay on radical documentaries, Tom Waugh outlines broad criteria for considering whether a work is activist, or,

in other words, committed. The films in question openly declare their solidarity with the subjects of their films; they participate in actively ongoing political struggles; and in order to "escape the entrapment of traditional ideological forms and work," the documentaries must proceed "with full awareness of the contradictions in play, hammering out the shapes of an evolving new revolutionary ideology around those struggles."[43] *Lolita* was produced and created by activist groups, it interviews activists, traverses free online platforms for viewing, and serves as an influence over the films that succeed it. However, with Waugh's criteria in mind we can start to articulate the ways that *Blackfish* is as activist as its low-budget predecessors. It openly aligns itself with former trainers and enthusiastically participates in advocating for change.

It is also worth remarking on the commonalities between activist works — *Blackfish* interviews many of the same subjects and uses some of the same stock footage as *Lolita*. It is a work in dialogue with its forerunners in order to prolong important discourse about animals in captivity. It is not simply a dialogue between the films, as each work gestures outward toward us, the audience. The film demands not only attention, but emotion, investment, and the will to change our behavior. We have discussed the *Blackfish* effect, but it evidently goes beyond and can be attributed to more than a single film. No doubt that without *Lolita* and others, the rhetoric and aesthetic qualities of *Blackfish* would have been different despite its subject matter.



The mosaic of voices contributing to the activist films discussed here confirms the necessity for activist art. Both Waugh and Alexandra Juhasz stress the importance of considering these committed works as *art*. Juhasz argues that though we may live in a virtual age in which anyone can publicly declare her or his political allegiances, these "lowly bits of evidence" cannot in themselves be art, cannot articulate an argument, and thus are not enough.[44] "Linking, unlike editing, creates associations without depth…excessive expression can no longer be the political goal."[45] Running parallel to the critiques lobbied against corporate logic and control in *Blackfish* and *Lolita* is part of Juhasz's argument for activist

The *Blackfish* effect.

art—we are at less risk of implicating ourselves if our expressions are not posted in the very spaces owned by many abhorrent companies. Of the actions taken after *Blackfish*, only the celebrity online shout-outs remain rooted in the virtual realm. For a digital work to be activist "it must participate in an artful leaving of the digital so as to allow the body to also engage in a place beyond representation." [46] Moreover, taking works offline to be distributed and created through varying means resists the homogeneity and conformity so integral to corporate environments.

As of late 2015, SeaWorld has seen an 84% drop in profits and it continues to lose money on ticket sales and stock shares. *Blackfish* adversely affected the corporation in more than a financial sense—the orca shows are reportedly being discontinued at the end of 2017 in all three locations: San Diego, San Antonio, and Orlando. SeaWorld has also dropped their lawsuit against the California Coastal Commission, as they will no longer breed orcas (originally, SeaWorld planned to sue the CCC because of a provision to their approved expansion project, which stipulated that they cease breeding orcas).[47] Though the news is optimistic about the future for cetaceans as entertainment, Gabriela Cowperthwaite's original statement upon learning of the possibility of SeaWorld ending their orca shows is wisely cautious.[48]

Three years after the making of *Blackfish* it is upsetting to learn that Tilikum is dying, thus ensuring his life will end in a tank rather than a sanctuary for rescued orcas. He has a rare bacterial infection in his lungs. He is believed to be about 35 years old—and while this confirms some statistics about the average adult lifespan of a male orca, many believe it is possible to live several decades longer in their natural habitats.

As for Lolita, she was recently declared part of an endangered species of orcas. Through the Endangered Species Act, activists hoped her new status would provide a much needed loophole that could result in her release from Miami Seaquarium. However, as of June 2016, a judge dismissed Lolita's case, arguing that animal activists need to change the Animal Welfare Act in order to ever hope for the release of Lolita. At 50, activists would like to see her retire peacefully, in a sea sanctuary where she can swim and live out her life in relative comfort.[49]



In 2016, Lolita was denied retirement to a sea sanctuary and remains incarcerated at Miami's Seaquarium.

To equate visible, tangible change with the success and value of a film is dangerous, and it contradicts much of the anti-capitalist rhetoric espoused by the films. This essay is not arguing such a position. Rather, these powerful changes in the lives of captive orcas are mentioned to end on an optimistic note, one that takes seriously the importance of activist art, considers it a continued necessity, and as a site for radical change. These activist documentaries emphasize the complex relationships between humans and captive animals, taking into account the repercussions of inflicting pain for financial compensation, and exploiting human and animal laborers. This demonstrates how activist art, especially documentaries, continues to effect change in our behavior for the good. Those changes need not be obvious, but progressive and lasting.

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Notes

1. John Hargrove, *Beneath the Surface: Killer Whales, Sea World, and Blackfish*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York: NY, 2015. [return to page 1]

2. Gabriela Cowperthwaite, "Why I Made 'Blackfish,'" *CNN*, October 28th, 2013, accessed February 24th, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2013/10/23/opinion/blackfish-filmmaker-statement/.

3. It grossed $2,073, 582, a not insignificant sum for this genre, even today with several finally achieving theatrical distribution. http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=blackfish.htm

4. *Lolita*, which will be addressed later in this essay, is an important comparison here, as it is about a marine park in Florida, the Miami Seaquarium, that currently houses the oldest captive whale in the US: Lolita. *The Whale* is a somber story of our inability to "live and let live"—Luna, the orca, was separated from her pod and apparently enjoyed the company of humans. His life was put at risk by boaters, whose propellers on the boat's underside could kill her—this was intensified by Luna's desire to approach humans. Despite Vancouver Island's protest against boating in that area, Luna did die from getting caught in propellers. And *The Cove*, like *Blackfish*, features the impassioned Ric O'Barry, a former dolphin trainer previously employed by the television show *Flipper*. While *The Cove* makes a case against unnecessary dolphin hunting that kills the cetaceans en masse each year, it is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. To be sure, dolphins and orcas share a similar fate: "swim with the dolphin programs," captivity and forced performances, and other such abuses, are imposed on dolphins in the name of capital.

5. Jane Desmond, *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999: 245. Although Desmond does not fully explicate this phrase, it best captures the relationship between trainer and orca, as one that is forced, but never openly acknowledged. The orca shows are designed to show off the orca and trainer working *together*, performing spectacular feats in unison.

6. In a montage of disaster the proceeds after the patron video discussed above, it is clear that all the disasters between park patrons, former trainers, and captive cetaceans would have been easily avoided if such amusement spaces did not exist.

7. Desmond, 146.

8. Or radically *not*—see Desmond page 248 for an analysis of the way Shamu is gender ambiguous so that any whale can fit the bill—less stress is placed on the breeding process, so long as a baby whale is available and can play Shamu.

9. Both Davis and Desmond note that minorities and those with less access to dispensable income do not patronize SeaWorld. However, varied class positions and races patronize theme parks, thus the argument that SeaWorld both caters to

a specific crowd as well as encourages that crowd to return.

10. Jane Desmond, "Performing 'Nature': Shamu at Sea World," in *Cruising the Performative: Interventions Into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality, and Sexuality*. ed. Sue-Ellen Case, Philip Brett, and Susan Leigh. Foster. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. According to Desmond's study from the mid-1990s, a typical day at SeaWorld would cost approximately $100 for a small family.

11. Christopher Frizzelle. "It's Time to Free Lolita, a Puget Sound Killer Whale That's Been Held Captive in Florida for 45 Years," *The Stranger*, September 30th, 2015, accessed February 24th, 2016, http://www.thestranger.com/features/feature/2015/09/30/22939219/its-time-to-free-lolita-a-puget-sound-killer-whale-thats-been-trapped-in-miami-for-45-years

12. John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?", *About Looking*, New York: Pantheon, 1977.

13. Yet, despite all of the history between us and animals, Berger suspects we are short-sighted, often not considering relations past the 1800s. Indeed "to suppose that animals first entered the human imagination as meat or leather or horn is to project a 19th century attitude backwards millennia." John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?", *About Looking*, New York: Pantheon, 1977; 1980: 2.

14. Ibid.

15. Desmond, fn 31, Chapter nine, 311.

16. Carl Safina, *Beyond Words: How Animals Think and Feel*, New York City: Henry Holt and Company, 2015. I mention this term to stress that killer whale is an unfortunate misnomer and "panda" connotes a mammal that poses no real threat to human life.

17. Although *Orca* is now seen as silly, it is possible that *Blackfish* terrifies us all the more for demystifying our beliefs about the possibility for relationships to form between humans and captive animals.

18. Jan Christopher Horak, "Wildlife Documentaries: From Classical Forms to Reality TV," *Film History: An International Journal*, 2006.

19 Lauren Carroll and Louis Jacobson, "Sea World says their whales live as long as wild ones do," *Politifact Florida*, March 24th, 2015, accessed February 24th, 2016, http://www.politifact.com/florida/statements/2015/mar/24/seaworld/seaworld-says-their-whales-live-long-wild-whales-d/.

20. Desmond 242

21. Frizzelle, np.

22. She has now been performing daily for over 45 years.

23. Frizzelle, np.

24. John Hargrove, a prominent interviewee in *Blackfish* went on to write a best-selling memoir about his time at SeaWorld: *Beneath the Surface: Killer Whales, SeaWorld, and the Truth Beyond Blackfish*. His testimony of the orcas being separated is particularly affective.

25. Desmond, 226.

26. Desmond, 226.

27. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, Hill & Wang, 1980.

28. Desmond, 230.

29. Ric O'Barry states in *Blackfish* that withholding food is food deprivation, though we often don't recognize it as such.

30. See their point-by-point rebuttal to the documentary which ends up inadvertently offering further information about their shady business practices in regards to the health and upkeep of the orcas. Both the response from SeaWorld and Cowperthwaite's response can be found here: http://www.blackfishmovie.com/news/, accessed February 24th, 2016. [return to page 2]

31. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington, IN; Indiana University Press, 1991: 83.

32. The orcas are quite close to the viewing area, offering patrons a rare, non-performative encounter up-with orcas. Her/his motivation to film was set-up by the parameters outlined by the park—as Desmond notes, they encourage constant recording (as do many tourist destinations) even warning patrons moments in advance to pick up their cameras. Thus, when the trainer is hauled into the water and the playfulness turns to danger, it takes the videographer a moment to register the situation. Once it becomes clear that the trainer's life is at risk, the camera drops; it is picked up once other trainers are alerted to the situation and resumes filming her ensuing rescue.

33. Desmond, 222.

34. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991: 38-45.

35. Jameson, 38-45; Desmond, 219.

36-37. Alexander Wilson, "The Betrayal of the Future: Walt Disney's EPCOT Center," in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, ed. Eric Smoodin. New York: Routledge, 1994: 119. "Almost all of the workings in Disney World are hidden from the spectator…[m]iles of underground corridors—'utilidors' in Disney parlance—transport workers, supplies, utilities, and telecommunications to the various parts of the 'Total Vacation Kingdom.'"[37] Wilson's description reads like a scene from Jia Zhanke's *The World* (2004), a film that details the hidden routines and lives of theme park performers.

38. Desmond, 218.

39. Desmond, 225.

40. Zac Estrada, "Vandals Hilariously Change Freeway Sign to Read 'Sea World Sucks,'" *Jalopnik*. May 27th, 2014, accessed on September 5th, 2016 http://jalopnik.com/vandals-hilariously-change-freeway-sign-to-read-sea-wor-1582103018.

41. Zimmermann, np.

42. Thomas Waugh, "Why Documentary Filmmakers Keep Trying to Change the World, or Why People Changing the World Keep Making Documentaries," in *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed*

Documentary, ed. Thomas Waugh. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1984: xiv.

43. Waugh, xiv.

44. Alexandra Juhasz, "Ceding the Activist Digital Documentary," in *New Documentary Ecologies: Emerging Platforms, Practices and Discourses*, ed. Kate Nash, Craig Hight, and Catherine Summerhayes. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014: 43-4.

45. Juhasz, 44.

46. Juhasz, 47.

47. This is a link to a time-lapse film, shot by activists who then played their film at the CCC hearing in order to contradict SeaWorld's claims. In the film, a whale, for several minutes, motionlessly floats in the pool as the audience looks on. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVTwe2HZ4UY

48. Though many, including Cowperthwaite worry that though the traditional show will no longer continue in San Diego. See Joshua Emerson Smith, "'Blackfish' Director wary of Sea World plan," *The San Diego Tribune*, November 9th, 2015, accessed February 24th, 2016, http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/news/2015/nov/09/gabriela-copwerthwaite-seaworld-blackfish-whales/.

49. Jenny Staletovich, "Lolita, Miami Seaquarium killer whale, is declared endangered," *Miami Herald*, February 4th, 2015, accessed February 24th, 2016, http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/miami-dade/article9304634.html.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



According to Walter Benjamin, Paul Klee's 1920 "Angelus Novus," depicts the angel of history, whose face is turned backward towards the past, seeing only catastrophe in its wake.

How green was my media

review by David Zeglen

Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller, *Greening the Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). 256 pp.

One of the introductory epigrams to *Greening the Media* is Walt Kelly's famous "We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us," but the modification "We Have Met the Enemy and It Is Capitalism,"[1][open endnotes in new window] better captures the overall tone of Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller's readable book. While many of the issues that Maxwell and Miller raise will be familiar to those already initiated by other well-known environmental advocacy works, *Greening the Media* recycles these continually relevant environmental problems and refreshingly links them together within the structure of the capitalist global production circuit. *Greening the Media* will no doubt appeal to the public's growing interest in the environmental and human costs of the global production of commodities, as evidenced by the success of National Public Radio's "Planet Money" online series on the making of a t-shirt in the global economy[2] as well as the popularity of Annie Leonard's online video project "The Story of Stuff."[3]

For Maxwell and Miller, it is the material production, consumption, and disposal of information and communications technology (ICT) in specific that poses the greatest threat to the environment and human beings. Throughout the book, the authors argue their case by carefully looking at each stage in the globally dispersed ICT production circuit. In the process, they uncover abominable and toxic working conditions as well as despoiled landscapes, imperiled skies, and poisoned waters. Although the authors give a clear sense of how ICT production has always had environmental consequences, they also frequently refer to the various facets of neoliberal globalization that have exacerbated the problem. For instance, the advertising-induced consumer obsession with newness, deregulated labor markets, bureaucratic corruption, and corporate greenwashing[4] are just some of the features that Maxwell and Miller describe to illustrate what drives the modern ICT production circuit.



Due in part to the efforts of anti-pollution and labor activists, corporations like Apple and Wal-Mart have sought to make their global supply chains more transparent to the public.



Hackers interrupt the evening news in Wenzhou, a city in eastern Zhejiang province, with anti-Communist Party messages.

Maxwell and Miller also evaluate current efforts to green the media. Finding contemporary approaches such as consumer activism via online video mash-ups and advertising parodies, corporate social responsibility strategies as represented by Apple's 2011 supply-chain auditing of its Chinese suppliers, and government policy initiatives like the "smart-grid" electricity distribution system too deeply entrenched in capitalist growth models, the authors propose their own alternatives based on institutional reconfigurations and a renewal of civic duty. Although their proposal has several shortcomings, Maxwell and Miller nevertheless argue that their "green citizenship" and "green governance" will green the global ICT production circuit more effectively than previous strategies have.

Given the habitual failure of policymakers to get corporations to significantly change their environmental and labor practices, as extensively outlined in Chapter Five, Maxwell and Miller first analyze individual strategies for greening the media. Surprisingly, they are not outright dismissive of personal strategies like green consumption. Instead, they carefully consider its gains and limitations before proposing some modifications to the practice. While green consumption has prompted companies to adopt corporate social responsibility, a business trend that Maxwell and Miller rightly criticize for contradictorily promoting "the magical fusion of environmentalism with growth, profits, and pleasure" (p. 25),



Thousands of Filipinos gather in Manila to demand the resignation of President Joseph Estrada.



The Rainforest Alliance's award-winning "Follow The Frog" campaign encourages ethical consumers to act locally if they want to save the rainforest.



A young Chinese factory worker employed at one of Foxconn's assembling factories in Shenzhen,

they also acknowledge that

> "persistent consumer demand for corporations… to take greater responsibility for environmental harm has forced self-described green businesses to generate a steady stream of documentation on supply chains" (Ibid).

For instance, Maxwell and Miller note that due to mounting public opposition to Wal-Mart's labor and environmental record, in 2007 the retail giant began their "going-green" policy by developing a publically accessible database for ethical consumers that tracks its suppliers' environmental and workplace records (p. 123).

Building on this virtuous cycle of consumer knowledge and green consumption, Maxwell and Miller incorporate environmental science terms and ecological ethics paradigms with thought experiments to help the reader apply an elevated model of green consumption more deeply tied to the environment. In the section "The Wondrous Cell Phone" (p. 36-40), Maxwell and Miller draw upon earlier defined concepts such as source function (the environment's ability to provide resources) and sink function (the environment's ability to absorb wastes) to outline how a green consumer might evaluate the eco-ethical dilemmas associated with cellphones. To guide the would-be green consumer, three ethical positions are considered:

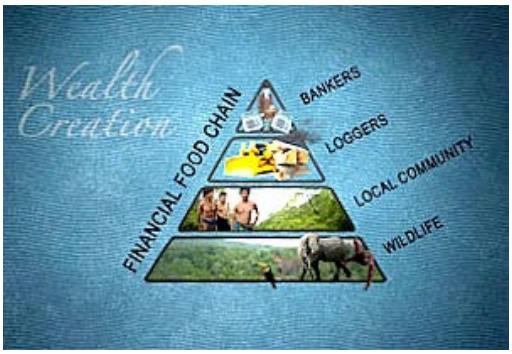
1. eco-centrism, which demands that cellphone manufacturing be immediately terminated to protect the Earth;
2. intermediate eco-ethics, which argues that cellphone manufacturing can be improved upon to find a balance between human and environmental needs; and
3. anthropocentric eco-ethics, the notion that cellphones first serve the instrumental needs of humans, but that their manufacture could be improved upon because of its impact on human well-being.

As a result, the book successfully draws in the reader/consumer by providing a conceptual bridge between the popular approaches to green consumption and more comprehensive ethical positions that can lead to "green citizenship." Chapter Four also proposes the need for international solidarity since Maxwell and Miller note that "low levels of unionization in the global supply chain of media technology severely hamper research that could empower labor organizers, environmental activists, and industry audits aiming to oversee and improve working conditions and eliminate environmental hazards" (p. 96). They therefore implicitly promise that green citizenship will include a framework to unite a variety of global actors to improve the global ICT production circuit.

Maxwell and Miller also vividly illustrate the cumulative impact ICT has had on the environment and human labor by laying out a detailed history of its material changes starting in the feudal period and ending in the capitalist present. As the book's historical narrative moves through each technological moment, the ICT production circuit grows more complex while also becoming more hazardous and destructive. Indeed, one of the book's most admirable features is its Benjaminian conceptualization of the history of the ICT production circuit. In "On The Concept of History" Walter Benjamin critiques the Enlightenment version of human history based on an exponentially progressive sequence of human achievements. Instead, Benjamin argues that history is akin to artist Paul Klee's print *Angelus Novus*:

> "his face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly

southern China became a social media sensation in 2008 when an Apple customer published photos he found saved in his newly purchased iPhone.



Global Witness, an anti-corruption organization, released a spoof film in 2013 that spotlights HSBC's investment in illegal logging firms in Borneo.



One of Greenpeace's parody ads for it's "Green My Apple" campaign to reduce the use toxic substances in the supply chain of Apple products.



> piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet... That which we call progress, is this storm." [5]

Similarly, Maxwell and Miller depict the material history of ICT as a constellation of human and environmental injustices that continue to blindly move forward, leaving only destruction in its wake.

While Maxwell and Miller's historical narrative ought to make it difficult for people to ignore all the environmental damage and human suffering ICT manufacturing has caused so that these issues weigh "like a nightmare on the brains of the living,"[6] many will still remain convinced that contemporary ICT technologies like e-readers have finally liberated them from the guilt of environmental destruction and labor exploitation that has long accompanied ICT production. But as Maxwell and Miller remind us, the Angelus Novus of ICT History continues to wreak havoc into the modern age, since "the environmental costs of production for one e-reader... far outweigh those of one book printed on recycled paper" (63).

Although one e-reader ends up being the equivalent of hundreds, and possibly thousands of books, magazines, and newspapers over the long term, the usage of such e-readers also consumes high volumes of electricity (generated predominately by coal in the United States) such that a half hour of e-reading is equivalent to the printing of one newspaper (Ibid). E-readers also require rare earth elements, which, unlike trees, cannot be easily replenished. The mining and eventual disposal of these rare earth elements, especially when exacerbated by consumer demand for newness, is also highly toxic both to the environment and to the health of laborers and communities near the supply stream or waste disposal facilities. Thus Maxwell and Miller illustrate some the complexities involved in calculating the overall environmental impact of contemporary ICT.

While Maxwell and Miller show the unique historical moment we live in right now, as the damage ICT production circuits causes has never been so severe and the burden for change never more necessary, the book doesn't explain what motivates changes in technology from the fifteenth century to the present. Simple production circuits for paper in the feudal period are shown to have contributed to mass deforestation and water contamination, and early inks and paper chemicals frequently poisoned workers, yet there is no sense of any countervailing forces working to improve these problems as history moves forward. Although it is not fatal to Maxwell and Miller's argument that they exclude a more dialectical unfolding of ICT production, as there is still some sense that it is ultimately a history of capitalism's expansion of markets, it still leaves open the suggestion that ICT is inherently destructive to the environment and human beings. If this is the case, then it raises the question of exactly how much environmental damage and human suffering is acceptable, if it is inevitable, for ICT production circuits to operate—a question that becomes more central as the book begins to develop its own solutions to greening the media.

Although Maxwell and Miller never propose a deep ecology position that calls for a return to some earlier age in human history, they do suggest that a return to the public sphere, particularly public libraries (Ibid) could lessen the environmental impact of contemporary ICT production and usage; a move that anticipates the direction of the authors' main intervention into greening the media in the book's final chapter. Maxwell and Miller elaborate on their strategy on their *Greening the Media* blog:

> "If we focus our attention on public libraries, debates about electronic versus paper distribution are transformed. These technologies become mere tools to support a model that is a proven facilitator of reading,

A young rag-picker looks for recyclable material in the largest garbage dump in the Indian state of Assam.



Many public libraries across the United States have incorporated e-readers as part of the services they offer to local citizens.

> thinking, research, conversation, and social mobility."[7]

In short, providing e-readers in public libraries is supposed to offset the environmental impact of their production since the public will use them frequently enough to make them more viable than traditional paperbound books.

Given their polemic in Chapter Five about the collusion between government bureaucracies and corporations that renders any public policy initiative relatively ineffective, Maxwell and Miller's public library proposal belies their earlier argument. Indeed, as Maxwell and Miller acknowledge on their blog, public libraries are already being hollowed out. Municipal governments across the United States have increasingly conspired with businesses to segregate neighborhoods along race and class lines in many cities making it all the more difficult to publicly fund libraries. In her study of the gradual gentrification of New Haven due to the collusion of the mayor's urban renewal projects and community development block grants with big business, Micaela Di Leonardo writes of the impact on the city's main public library:

> "On Mondays at noon, within ten minutes of its opening, a line of at least a dozen eager New Haveners, most of them of color, is waiting to check out books, and every computer terminal is immediately taken, with hardly a white face to be seen. The visitor, looking down, would realize that this public space, like the streets outside the highly gentrified, privatized core, is rarely cleaned."[8]

Even if public libraries that hadn't already been privatized were burdened with the task of mitigating a portion of the environmental costs of ICT, Leonardo shows that the alignment of state and corporate interests has already contributed to deep-seated social inequalities related to limited public library access. If Maxwell and Miller, invoking Stuart Hall's claim of the poor's "legitimate materialism, born out of centuries of physical deprivation and want" (23) would like to lessen ICT's burden on the environment and humanity while supplying it to everyone, then individuals should be encouraged to generate an intersectional mass movement to overwhelm the capitalist state, rather than look to it for green solutions.

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The Mosireen media collective running a screening of one of their documentaries in downtown Cairo during the Arab Spring.



Planet Money takes the viewer through the global production circuit of an ordinary t-shirt.



Walt Kelly's 1971 Earth Day strip of "Pogo" became a rallying cry for the environmentalist movement, which has since been invoked uncritically countless times. Fred Magdoff is credited with revising the now-famous phrase to reflect a more accurate account of what is to

This problematic proposal based on neoliberal state intervention and civic duty is returned to in more detail in the final chapter. Throughout the book, Maxwell and Miller chronicle the deep structural problem of global ICT production circuits and intimate a global mass movement that ties together "green consumers, activists, policy makers, and unionists" (p. 125), presumably in order to overthrow the state-business alliance. Yet "green citizenship" ultimately ends up relying on the corrupted neoliberal nation-state, since the three forms of green citizenship proposed—environmental, sustainability, and resistance—"offer strategies for change that can be channeled to representative government" (p. 144). This same representative government that Maxwell and Miller chide for claiming that "the private sector can play a role, along with government" in environmental policy (p. 119), is also supposed to be the mechanism for regulating the very companies that continue their harmful production circuit practices.

Maxwell and Miller accompany green citizenship with "green governance," an organizational reform of government based on participatory inclusion and decentralization. But this proposal is just as fraught with problems. Even though Maxwell and Miller claim that "research… provides evidence that decentralized, participatory governance can play a vital role in policy making" (p. 147), international development practice has long since problematized the assumptions behind government decentralization and participatory reforms. As Jonathan Rigg points out,

> "Decentralization and democratization do not go hand-in-hand and decentralization—like participation—tends to become caught up in local-level political tensions and asymmetries… Decentralization, therefore, when there are deep-seated inequalities in terms of wealth and power, and when local level institutions are dominated by elites will only further empower those elites while permitting them to capture an even greater share of resources."[9] [open notes in new window]

Despite the repeated emphasis on individual strategies throughout the book, Maxwell and Miller remove the human element from government by not considering local cultural power relations and conditions, while inadvertently universalizing organizational solutions that shouldn't be universalized. As just one example shows, China has been decentralizing its environmental governance gradually over the past several decades, yet local authorities continue to favor economic growth policies over standards and regulations,[10] despite growing protests from ICT laborers. Furthermore, Maxwell and Miller graft the notion of "green citizenship" onto various local movements that may not necessarily identify first and foremost as "green citizens." In their examples of "sustainability citizenship," Maxwell and Miller include the Latin American, Brazilian, and California-based ragpickers who have mobilized to protect their work, yet, these groups might just as easily identify as "laborers" rather than "citizens," relating more to their own material conditions instead of the liberal notion of rights and duties under green governance.

Given the emphasis on the deplorable conditions of laborers coupled with the sustained critique of the economic growth models of government institutions, it is therefore surprising that Maxwell and Miller don't come to a more grassroots solution for greening the media. This contradiction occurs mainly because the

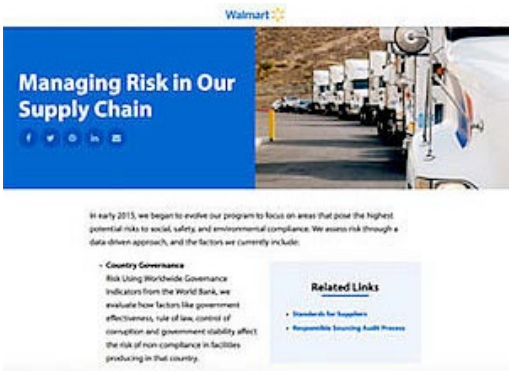
blame for the massive environmental degradation of the planet.



The release of "The Story of Stuff" in 2007 launched a comprehensive online campaign to improve global supply chains, which continues to grow and gain followers to this day.



UNI Global Union, a global union federation, released an online video in 2013 chronicling the history of Wal-Mart's poor treatment of its workers.



Walmart's version of its supply chain never mentions workers, only compliance: "In early 2015, we began to evolve our program to focus on areas that pose the highest potential risks to social, safety, and environmental compliance."

authors demonstrate a latent ambivalence towards using ICT itself. For example, in Chapter One, Maxwell and Miller denigrate the efficacy of "blogging or posting videos online to riff on commercial culture" (p. 23). They rightly argue that focusing on digital strategies usually leads to the cultural and academic valorization of the immaterial labor of Internet users in the Global North (pp. 15-16) while the labor conditions of workers toiling away in the ICT production circuits of the Global South are ignored. Yet they also consider Greenpeace's "Green My Apple" campaign—an Internet riff of Apple's own website layout—emblematic of a more radical form of green citizenship (p. 144). Although Maxwell and Miller are critical of the ICT advocacy wrought by so-called immaterial labor, they are nonetheless reluctant to reject it outright.[11]

Because of this ambiguity, Maxwell and Miller overlook the grassroots possibilities for change in the Global South that could be facilitated by ICT. Although the disparity in technology access between global regions—the "global digital divide"—continues to impact the educational experiences paradoxically needed to develop ICT skills, studies have shown that less-infrastructure dependent ICT, particularly mobile phones, are growing exponentially in the Global South, suggesting a possible inroads for mass mobilization.[12] In Chapter Four, Maxwell and Miller lament how the ICT production circuit fragments workers making mobilization practically impossible:

> "with labor so geographically dispersed via international subcontracting, union density in the ICT/CE industries is 'startingly low around the world'" (p. 96).

ICT could help mitigate this problem, as demonstrated by farmers of the Filipino People Power II movement in 2001 utilizing cell phones to organize mass protests that led to the overthrow of President Estrada.[13] As environmentalist Giles Slade notes, the cellphone "permits a new micro-level of social coordination previously unavailable and indeed unimaginable" to human beings.[14] Thus the potentialities for a labor disruption on a mass scale coordinated with help from ICT micro-coordination could provoke several significant outcomes.

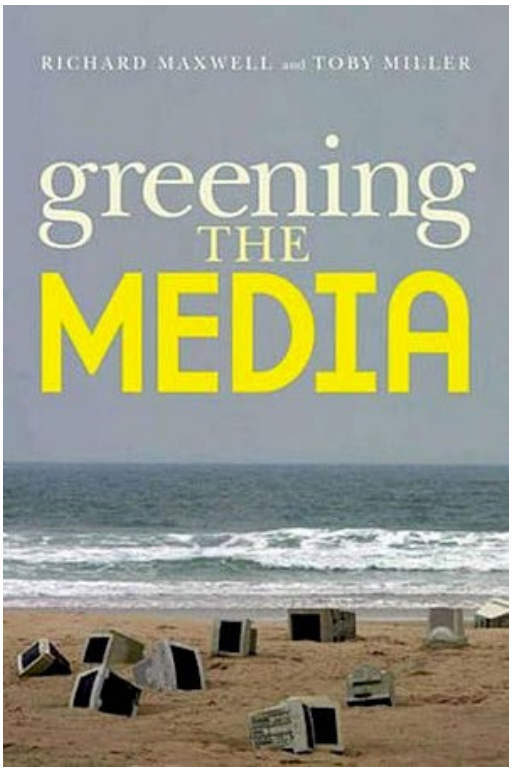
Maxwell and Miller also express frustration at consumers who worship ICT as if their mobile devices came into the world independent of any labor or material inputs—what the authors call "the technological sublime"; a reconceptualization of Marx's commodity fetishism (p. 7). Maxwell and Miller's aforementioned three paradigms of ecological ethics are meant to reacquaint consumers with the materiality of their ICT, but the increasingly international division of labor in ICT production also provides various access points for laborers to disrupt the technological sublime. In 2008, a worker who assembled iPhones in Apple's Foxconn factory in China accidentally uploaded a photo of herself and saved it as the default background on several phones before they shipped to North America for sale.[15] As a result, her image disrupted the consumer commodity fetish of Apple products by revealing, if only for a moment, the human labor behind the iPhone's construction. Although an accident that likely had little, if any, long-term effects on the consumers who received these iPhones, this fortuitous encounter reveals the kind of imaginative possibilities available to laborers in the global production circuit.

All of this is not to imply that the Global South simply be provided with computer and iPhone donations from the Global North, an idea trotted out by Maxwell and Miller as part of green citizenship (p. 142). As Jan Nederveen Pieterse points out,

"the Internet is principally a middle-class medium; as a medium, essentially an extension of the typewriter, it presupposes literacy and the ability to absorb or create content and digital literacy. It may be termed a Starbucks approach to [development]."[16]



The World Wildlife Foundation's palm oil programme encourages consumers to learn about the destructive cost to wildlife and the environment that comes with the production of palm oil from various plantations in the Global South.



This also applies to social movements. Instead, Pieterse sensibly suggests that we look at how individuals have used traditional ICT such as television, radio, and the telephone—more ubiquitous forms of media across the Global South that can broadcast to mass audiences than modern digitalia—for their own political purposes.[17] Indeed, this notion of using contextually appropriate and broader ICT to develop social movements is not only more ecologically sound since it relies on pre-existing resources, but it is also more culturally embedded as a social practice. For instance, more Chinese currently have access to television than they do to smart phones. Thus it is not surprising that an underground network of Chinese democrats recently hacked several Chinese television networks instead of Chinese websites in order to denounce the Communist Party's policies.[18] Likewise, during the Arab Spring, the media activist collective Mosireen used basic video cameras and projectors to educate Internetless communities about the Egyptian military's crimes against civilians.[19] Contextually specific ICT can be used in a similar fashion to disrupt and/or green various points in the ICT production circuit in the Global South.

This is not to endorse political quietism in the Global North, where activists merely wait for the structural conditions of global capitalism to collapse on their own. As much as Maxwell and Miller would be loath to admit, one way to assist the Global South via ICT is through digital activism. One reason Maxwell and Miller outright dismiss the "playful hackers, YouTubers, bloggers and other volunteers" is because they require free, or nearly free resources for its revolution—presumably such things like free software, public domain licensing, free file-sharing, etc.—a model that the authors claim is identical to

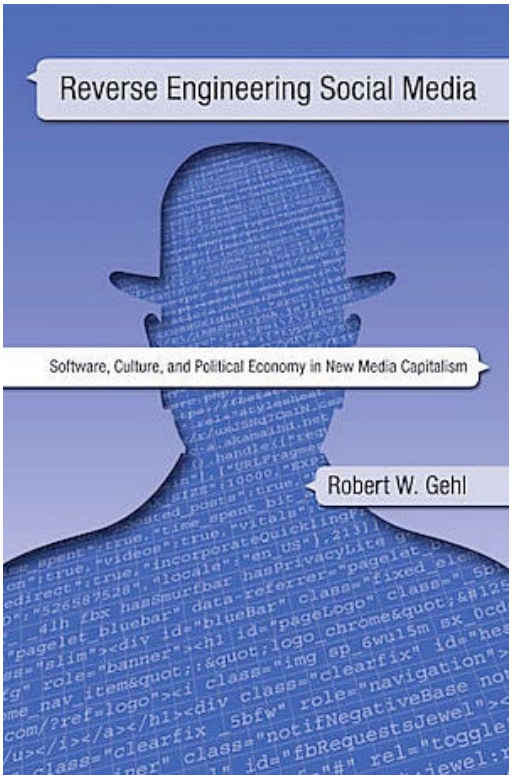
> "what paper-mill owners must have said about the rivers and endless forests at their disposal, or how the first voltage barons and their banking and communications customers felt about cheap coal" (161).

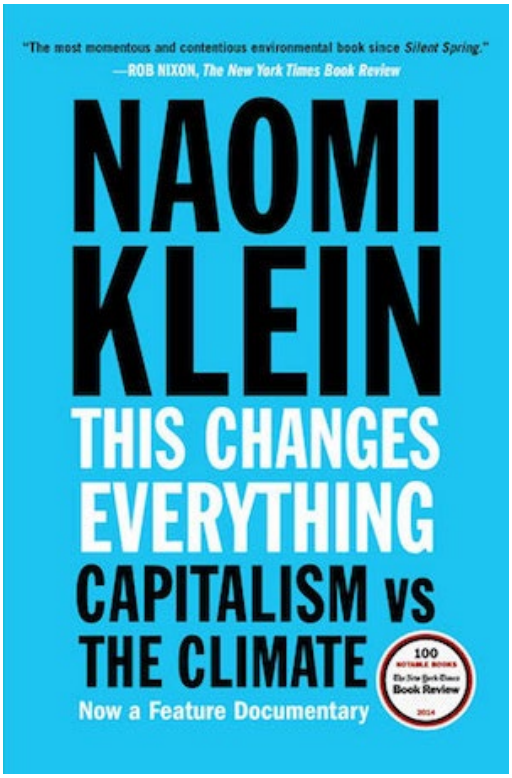
Maxwell and Miller rightly draw attention to the lack of consideration over what negative externalities digital strategies impose on the environment. Yet disavowing an entire online community for some of its theoretical flaws ignores how hacktivists and highly knowledgeable users have developed ICT disembedded from capital in ways advantageous to the Global South.

For instance, the online distribution of manuals and software for reverse engineering ICT hardware—including smart phones, televisions, and radios – not only circumvents WTO intellectual property rights, but also fosters indigenous modifications to locally established technologies. Robert W. Gehl similarly notes that reverse engineering as a social practice can lead to the construction of ICT tools that help shape a better politics beyond capitalism.[20] Although reverse engineered ICT is always threatened by the prospect of being appropriated by capitalism, companies like Microsoft clearly feel threatened by the prospect of reverse engineered ICT, and have initiated strategies in various Global South countries to reassert capital's dominance.[21]

Additionally, efforts to make software platform independent—programs designed to run on any computer regardless of its operating system, be it whatever various versions of Mac O/S X or Windows—mitigate Maxwell and Miller's concern about the consumer obsession with ICT newness. Maxwell and Miller retort that digital labor invokes "the Schumpeterian fantasy of entrepreneurs leading the way" (Ibid), yet this mischaracterizes digital activism since one of its primary tendencies is the notion of collective innovation, which also includes collaboration with non-technical users.

For the less technically inclined, YouTube, Twitter, and the blogosphere (an outlet Maxwell and Miller are familiar with) provide interactive opportunities for users





to contribute to and join in on the critique of global ICT production circuits. Over the past several years, a litany of social media campaigns on supply chains have gone viral, including the Rainforest Alliance's *Follow the Frog* video, the World Wildlife Foundation's palm oil program, and Greenpeace and Global Witness' online spoof commercials. UNI Global Union, an international worker organization dedicated to forging solidarity between laborers around the world, has also joined in by posting videos on YouTube that show Wal-Mart's egregious supply chain practices.[22] Crucially, these organizations are not just throwing videos up for users to simply consume. Indeed, Maxwell and Miller downplay the reasons for the success of *The Story of Stuff* by referring to it as a short film rather than an online project (p. 161). As Michael O'Heaney, executive director of *The Story of Stuff,* points out, online videos must engage audiences as "co-creators" by providing materials and resources to help users become more active in developing their own projects, repurposing online content, and developing their own networks for action.[23]

But all these possibilities are not considered in *Greening the Media* since the root of Maxwell and Miller's ambiguity over the usage of ICT stems from the unanswered question of how much damage to the environment and human life is acceptable for the development of ICT if such outcomes inevitably result from production circuits. As suggested above, the answer to this question lies within the various articulated social formations of the Global South in collaboration with the digital labor of the Global North. In short, whatever ICT the bourgeoisie develops that becomes dominant in a given social formation thus becomes one of the tools that can be used to dig their own graves. Instead, Maxwell and Miller get caught up in the environmental contradictions of the Global North, proposing a sustainability citizenship that engages with capitalism's growth model, even while they repeatedly deem the latter problematic.

Maxwell and Miller state at the beginning of the book that the reader "will be startled by the scale and pervasiveness" of the environmental and human risks of global ICT production circuits (p. 1), and, as such, *Greening the Media* is indispensable for understanding capitalism's structured exploitation of people and nature. Yet by the final chapter, having suggested some kind of grassroots solution against the corporate state along the way, Maxwell and Miller ultimately resort to a modest liberal proposal for reforming capitalism. As a consequence, Maxwell and Miller limit their ambitions by not considering the possibility or even necessity for a revolutionary grassroots movement to institute another mode of production.

Sadly, the growing difficulty with writing in more radical terms says more about the contemporary neoliberal colonization of the imagination than they do about this book's particular solutions to greening the media. To invoke Fredric Jameson's oft-quoted remark, it has now become "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."[24] To be sure, one of the latest left critiques of current environmental strategies, Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything,* contains several similar conceptual moves as *Greening the Media*. Like Maxwell and Miller, Klein articulates a fundamental contradiction with state-endorsed market-based plans to improve the environment, this time related to global warming, such as cap and trade schemes and "clean" fracking.[25] Klein argues that the problem of climate change cannot be resolved without challenging the intrinsic logic of capitalism, whilst advocating a grassroots movement based on deeper and more decentralized democracy as one possible solution - a notion

identical to Maxwell and Miller's green citizenship and governance. Finally, Klein concludes her book by reassuring the reader that revolution as a means for social transformation isn't a viable option because history has shown that they "don't have much to offer in the way of roadmaps."[26] As Jodi Dean points out, this is nothing short of a disavowal of the achievements that the radical left has won from almost two centuries of large scale mobilizing and strategizing, while also delimiting the range of tactics available to address what is clearly one of the most pressing issues of our time.[27]

With this in mind, it must be acknowledged that Maxwell and Miller have done a tremendous job laying out the imperiled nature of our particular moment in ICT history. To move forward, the planet and its inhabitants now need more uncompromising strategies from the left on how to dismantle the capitalist state.

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Mourning in America

by the editors

> "Don't mourn. Organize!" — Joe Hill

The day after Trump's election we met friends and family who expressed their shock and fears in intensely personal ways. One thought war, nuclear and/or cyber war was now inevitable: perhaps she should stock up on survival supplies. A recently retired guy feared the end of affordable healthcare and that insurance companies would revert to excluding people with pre-existing conditions, himself included. Another, having recently gained citizenship, said her daughter, who had grown up in the United States but who was not yet a citizen was afraid she might be sent back to their original country. A trans friend thought all equality for LGBTQ people was under immanent threat, including her decade-old marriage. A complete reversion of women's reproductive rights seemed likely, leading to a return to a time of underground abortion networking.

After 18 months of electoral rumble and tumble, the People (or at least those who decide to vote) of the United States have spoken and made their choice. But the fundamental problems, both political and social, exposed as open sores remain. And sorting out what's next and what realignments might take place is a priority.

Our own core position has been the same all along. With an empire in decline, Presidential electoral politics is at present a barren field when the choices are between two versions of neoliberalism. The central task for radicals is to cultivate the base, work locally, build realistic coalitions, and progress where openings appear. Economic issues, essentially class politics, remain the fundamental basis for a radical agenda. The failure of the two candidates to provide convincing leadership to reverse economic inequality left voters with no effective choice, and many, obviously the white working class in particular, now awakened as an aggrieved identity group, chose the guy who they didn't respect or even trust, but who was an outsider and might change something. It was less hope than desperation for the declining working and stagnant middle classes. And Trump's bullying style and slogan rhetoric opened the way for open racism, nativism, nationalism, and sexism. Trump needed the Alt-Right to win; he doesn't need them in order to govern. But the door has been opened.

Of course, any mildly thoughtful person of anywhere on the political spectrum could see that Trump was all bluster and bluff and lies. No real "wall" will be built. Just as Reagan granted universal amnesty to the undocumented and promised rigorous enforcement of hiring to stop illegal migration, enforcement never happened: industry needed cheap labor. Bringing back manufacturing to the rust belt won't happen: technology has changed the skills and size of the workforce while industrial unions, the real protection workers had, have been decimated. The Clinton Presidency pushed free trade and NAFTA, admitting that deindustrialization meant the workforce would have to be retrained for a new economy to have good jobs. But it never happened. The blue collar labor force lost

their family wage jobs and could only find work at Walmart and the rest of the low wage and precarious retail and service sector. Home loan and tenuous mortgage failures drove people from their houses into trailer parks and homelessness.

Despite the slogans, curbing banks, reigning in financial capitalism, halting globalization, and saving small farms and businesses will not be carried out by Trump's coterie of advisors and the Republican elite who immediately on his win trumpeted cutting individual and corporate taxes, deregulating commerce, encouraging conglomeration; all of which restrict competition. And obviously there is no simple solution to the dilemmas of US foreign policy in a time of continuous and uneven imperial decline. No one can ever win an endless "war on terrorism" and the situation in the Middle East can't be fixed by a Trumpian magic bullet of bombing civilians, waterboarding prisoners, or sealing the borders to any and all Muslims.

In this light, the Bernie Sanders campaign gave hope for mobilizing younger people. But class issues are always inflected with evolving social and cultural currents. Thus the remarkable tide of our time is seen in Black Lives Matter and a resurgent movement for racial and gender equality. Locally grounded work, coalitions and alliances, concrete plans, overcoming superficial antagonisms among progressives while learning anew to respect differences and priorities is the task for this new terrain. But we've been there before.

In 1981, at the beginning of the Reagan era, we wrote an editorial about radical cultural work: http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC26folder/EdlRadCultWkNow.html. We were responding to the first movie star President. Now we have the first Reality TV star President-elect. Media savvy people know just how scripted, edited, and predetermined such dramas are. Time to present a counter-narrative, to tell our story.

Chuck Kleinhans
Julia Lesage

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

The last word—#BlackLivesMatter

by the editors

To help us move forward after the disappointing U.S. 2016 elections, we would do well to consider the model for thinking and activism developed by the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Along with its broader coalition, Movement For Black Lives—M4BL, #BlackLivesMatter is both a communications network and a platform setting out ways of thinking about and getting together to forge needed change. Groups working around the country toward these changes in the lives of black people have allied themselves in a coalition; their platform articulates a wide range of political struggle dealing not only with race, but with gender, disability, class, and U.S. imperialism. The Movement is multi-leveled, with an overall analysis and general set of concerns (articulated on the websites); following that, independent local chapters organize around specific issues and local exigencies.

The very assertion, Black Lives Matter, and the movement's example of collective action, gathering in the streets to protest the murder of black people by police, indicates a framework for thinking, teaching, writing, and doing cultural work that we need when there is such a political divide in in the United States. First of all, the words themselves—*Black Lives Matter*—indicate how much we need to speak about U.S. history and social/legal institutions in a way that clearly demonstrates the extent to which race shapes everyone's lives. In fact, many writers have taught us how race works and how it has shaped our country.[1] [open endnotes in new window] But the recent elections now demonstrate how race's foundational violence and cumulative effect in the United States are not understood or acknowledged by many white citizens. With this editorial, we are asking our readers to return to considering our national history of race so that we can readily articulate it to others. That is, all of us striving for an equitable society need to be able to make clear to others, probably over and over, how racial discrimination functions to shape people's lives.

(The editors of *Jump Cut* are white U.S. citizens and are presenting this editorial with a focus on the United States. We understand that race and caste work themselves out in different ways in other countries. Significantly #BlackLivesMatter has spread internationally.)

Unpacking race as it is articulated in the dominant culture usually means dealing with code words: the criminal, the immigrant, the illegal alien, urban problems, the inner city, the ghetto, entitlement, the undeserving, welfare, drugs, panhandlers, and unfair advantages. We have to ask each time we hear them what functions these words serve and how they provide an outlet for certain kinds of tensions, at the same time they mask and elide an understanding of the root causes of what they refer to.

In historical terms, the United States and its capitalist economic system are built on a foundation of slavery and genocide of the native people. After slavery, in the Reconstruction era, many black men were arrested as vagrants and impressed into chain gangs, through which labor they rebuilt the South, constructing infrastructure and working in the fields.[2] In addition, Jim Crow laws in the South put in place the social structure of segregation, which marked skin color as the reason for an inferior position, that is, established "color" as a reason for caste.[3] As Cheryl Harris traces white supremacy's U.S. history, *whiteness* became a property, both legally and psychologically; from slavery on it has been "the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings."[4]

Southern racial violence and available blue collar jobs in the North led to the Great Migration of blacks to Northern cities for a good part of the 20th century. In the North, "urban problems" began to be associated with "black spaces," since blacks were crowded into restricted, often rundown housing sites as a matter of economic necessity; they had limited opportunity to buy homes elsewhere because of real estate housing covenants, redlining and racialized lending practices. Later, with deindustrialization and the decline of manufacturing jobs in the United States over many years, especially as multinational corporations moved work abroad, unemployment among urban blacks declined drastically, especially for young black men. As George Lipsitz explains,

> "Declining numbers of blue collar jobs, capital flight, discrimination by employers in the expanding retail sector of the economy, locating new businesses in suburban locations, residential segregation, and cutbacks in social programs and government employment .. all contributed to increased rates of minority unemployment."[5]

In many ways, whiteness has an economic value but it is not openly acknowledged or even understood.[6] For example, a common explanation by young white professionals moving from the city as they start to raise children—"We're looking for a place in a suburb with good schools"—is not usually considered in a conversation as a "racial" statement. That is because the speakers and probably the listeners experience whiteness from what Richard Dyer calls an "unmarked" positionality in which people define selfhood *sans* race.[7] Few whites think of themselves or describe their life trajectory in terms of the role that their own race plays in their lives, their situation, their chances to succeed. Yet in the above scenario, all the terms—moving away from the city to live in a suburb; buying a house; shaping a child's future; living near a good school—refer to institutions and locations shaped by racial history. Race influences buying and owning property, institutional lending policies, school funding and quality of education, and potential increase of family wealth—especially through investing in a home that regularly increases in value. For example, if blacks, too, have moved to the suburbs, they have often been targeted by lending institutions specifically with subprime loans and other onerous mortgage terms, so that the recession of 2008 saw their household worth fall by over half.[8]

Race has a spatial dimension. Most visibly, the inner city in large urban areas is predominantly black. Public funds have been channeled away from there. Movie theaters and grocery supermarkets have long been closed there. Cab drivers often refuse to take passengers there. Houses are devalued there. The "inner city" location serves an enclosure, and in mainstream discourse it's seen to harbor criminals, vagrants, the homeless, drug lords, and gangs. It's the place for police to patrol, now with military-style armaments and policies of mass roundups of youth, using such tactics as stop and frisk. From day to day, the material reality of this location structures both the lives and minds of those who live there. And this lived reality teaches black people many societal structures often invisible to whites.

For example, communicating such insights by tracing the history of mass incarceration of young black men, a piercing new documentary directed by Ava Du Vernay, *13th*, analyzes how the connotative association of *black* with *criminal* goes back to Reconstruction but now has led to more punitive laws and a more militarized police force that specifically target black neighborhoods. In particular, laws against drug possession and crack cocaine have swollen the U.S. prison population with a disproportional incarceration of blacks.[9] Tragically but important in terms of resistance, we have seen an astonishing number of police killings of unarmed black people on the streets, sometimes captured by witnesses' cell phones and posted with viral circulation on the Internet, and these have provoked large street protests and inspired the founding of #BlackLivesMatter.

#BlackLivesMatter began with a Twitter protest against the acquittal of George Zimmerman for killing Trayvon Martin and expanded into organizing a Black Lives Matter bus ride to Ferguson MO to protest the police shooting of Michael Brown. Its original founders were queer black women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors-Brignac, Opal Tometi, who maintain the original website.[10] The movement that has evolved from that nucleus is a decentered, participatory, loosely-knit organization of local groups, some of whom have structured a broad platform of demands under the rubric of The Movement For Black Lives—M4BL.[11] Such demands are found on both the BlackLivesMatter and the M4BL websites and are remarkable in their scope. For example, the BlackLivesMatter website ties together the need to consider and act upon the state's responsibility for poverty and imprisonment, black women's burden for sustaining children and family, relegation of undocumented immigrants to the shadows, fetishizing and disposing of queer and trans people, and squeezing black people with disabilities into "boxes of normality."[12] This a new kind of integrative, cross-platform political activism and theorizing. Angela Davis, long involved in the prison abolition movement, speaks to its effectiveness:

> "When we discover what appears to be one relatively small and marginal aspect of the category [here, gender vis-à-vis race]—or what is struggling to enter the category so that it can basically bust up the category [here, trans vis-à-vis gender]—this process can illuminate so much more than simply looking at the normative dimensions of the category." …
>
> "I want to emphasize the importance of approaching both our theoretical explorations and our movement activism in ways that enlarge and expand and complicate and deepen our theories and practices of freedom."[13]

One of the ways that integrative cross-platform activism has grown is from theorizing by critical black, trans and disability scholars. An earlier-generation legal scholar and activist, Kimberle Crenshaw, developed the concept of *intersectionality*, now defined in the *Oxford Dictionary* in this way:

> "the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage"[14]

The concept of *intersectionality*—especially as it adds to our understanding overlapping systems of discrimination—brings together different fields of academic inquiry and it aids us politically in building coalitions. In addition, contemporary environmental, trans, and disability scholars have added to this discussion the concept of *biopolitics*—that is, the way that the state targets or willfully neglects whole groups of people, diminishing their life chances and pushing them to live in substandard conditions. Politically, thinking in terms of

biopolitics means that we need to evaluate our activist strategies, especially around racially inflected issues, in terms of an issue's magnitude, considering its ramifications for the population as a whole. For example, if one were to shift political focus from the reproductive rights slogan, "a woman's right to choose," to the concept of reproductive *justice*, it would more accurately reflect the problems that women of color, and poor women around the world have with bearing children or not. As trans legal scholar Dean Spade writes,

> "The reproductive justice movement illustrates how an intersectional critique of single-axis politics and its demands for legal rights leads to a focus on population-level systems that distribute harm and violence through gendered racialization processes. The reproductive justice movement's critiques of white reproductive rights frameworks — particularly the [critique's] assertion that reproductive justice for women of color requires interventions into criminalization, child welfare, environmental regulation, immigration, and other arenas of administrative violence — illustrate how intersectional critique and activism move away from individual rights and toward a focus on [the state's] population control."[15]

In addition, the environmental crisis has led many authors to deal with pollution, climate change, loss of animal and plant diversity, and sea level rise in terms of the biopolitical effect of these planetary changes on the most vulnerable among us.[16] In this way, hurricane Katrina's devastating effect on New Orleans' black population, abandoned by the government, gave us all a chilling glimpses into U.S. biopolitics, as do the ongoing threats against immigrants. What is notable is the degree to which the platform proposals of The Movement for Black Lives reflect this new kind of multifaceted and broad-ranging analysis as the basis for political organizing. We at *Jump Cut* have long advocated such broad-based radical politics and look forward to participating in new collective efforts toward social change.

Chuck Kleinhans
Julia Lesage

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Notes

1. The footnotes indicate texts we have found most teacherly. All are a useful place to start on the journey of political self-education. [return to text]

2. Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003). *13th,* documentary film directed by Ava DuVernay, 1h 40m, Netflix. DuVernay website: <https://twitter.com/AVAETC>

3. "By the turn of the twentieth century, every state in the South had laws on the books that disenfranchised blacks and discriminated against them in virtually every sphere of life, lending sanction to a racial ostracism that extended to schools, churches, housing, jobs, restrooms, hotels, restaurants, hospitals, orphanages, prisons, funeral homes, morgues, and cemeteries." Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,* (New York: The New Press, 2012), ebook, Chapter 1.

4. "Whiteness as Property," Cheryl I. Harris, *Harvard Law Review*, June 1993, 106:8 , p. 1720.

5. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), p. 165. See also Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011) on place and race in the United States.

6. Andrew Hacker, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (New York: Scribner, 2003). Ebook, Chapter Three: "Being Black in America."

7. Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

8. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016). Ebook: Chapter One. Taylor is citing a 2013 report by Institute on Assets and Social Policy, "The Roots of the Widening Racial Wealth Gap," quoted in Jamelle Bouie, "The Crisis in Black Homeownership," *Slate*, July 24, 2014.

9. Ava Du Vernay, dir., *13th*.
Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*.
Angela Y. Davis, interviews, *Abolition Democracy: Beyond Empire, Prisons and Torture* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005).
"One million black people are locked in cages in this country—one half of all people in prisons or jails," Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement" < http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>

10. blacklivesmatter.com. See also 8 min. video documentary filmmaker Sabrina Schmidt Gorden made with the three founders, *How a hashtag defined a movement*, at emergingus.com. < https://emergingus.com/how-a-hashtag-defined-a-movement-5efa7d755fab#.2seoqp28e>

11. https://policy.m4bl.org/

12. http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/

13. Angela Y. Davis, “Feminism and Abolition: Theories and Practices for the Twenty First Century,” talk at The University of Chicago May 2013, reprinted in *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), chapter 8 <https://beyondcapitalismnow.wordpress.com/2013/08/08/angela-y-davis-feminism-and-abolition-theories-and-practices-for-the-21st-century/>

14. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/intersectionality
Kimberley Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43:6 (July 1991), pp. 1241-1299.
Crenshaw is also co-founder of the African American Policy Forum, one of the organizations allied with #BlackLivesMatter and home of #SayHerName, #BlackGirlsMatter, and #WhyWeCantWait. < http://www.aapf.org/>

15. Dean Spade, "Intersectional Resistance and Law Reform," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38:4, 2012, p. 1032.

16. Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007); *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Learning: all together now

by the editors

While sometimes dismissed (or sometimes valued) for being an ivory tower, remote from the workaday world, higher education today is deeply imbricated with all aspects of society. The past few years have ramped up controversy and some turmoil especially around issues of racism and sexism, costs and funding, education for life and for employment. As teachers and writers in and around U.S. colleges and universities (and with some experience abroad), and as having been present in the Sixties, the current turmoil is familiar and welcome to us. Back then, the antiwar movement—ranging from anti-draft organizing to demands for a new foreign policy and from a growing anti-imperialism to an active GI and veteran support projects—was much broader and more effective than shown in the now-standard stock footage of the '68 Democratic convention police riot and the Kent State murder of peaceful student protestors. The now-neglected student movement of the times surged from Berkeley's 1964 Free Speech Movement to the San Francisco State teacher-student strike for reforms serving a diverse working class student body. With momentum the student movement led to Teaching Assistant union organizing, student demands for a more diverse faculty and curriculum, as well as strikes, and black student athletes demanding racial justice. The parallels to recent campus actions are clear, though not exact. Sixties and early Seventies campuses were also the rich seedbed for the flowering of feminism, gay rights activism, ecology awareness, an anti-imperialist global perspective, and advancing the cultural understanding of racial and ethnic minorities. In fact, the New Left and partner movements developed a profound and rigorous analysis of U.S. life and politics, of what needed change, and tried to initiate grass roots progress.

Today on college campuses, the echoes of the Sixties have a different resonance. Then most celebrated action took place at elite schools and residential ones. Today "college" more clearly spans a much broader segment of the population with community colleges a more central part of the overall system, and a much more diverse student body especially at the tiers of public university systems. And the nature of the faculty has changed as well, with the majority of classroom teaching done by contingent faculty well off the tenure track. For decades industry has shredded its older models of apprentice training, the "volunteer" armed forces no longer work as a training pass-through for technical specialties, and robotization and automation have led to deskilling the work force which can then be moved wholesale offshore where assembly labor is prime.

Against this backdrop, neoliberalism has re-shaped US higher education (with similarities in the other parts of the industrial West). Today there are key trends which all contribute to a perfect storm with many countercurrents, riptides, and occasional aberrant tidal waves.
•Defunding state higher education while escalating tuition, fees, and services.
•Bloating administration with an expanding corporate model in which MBAs

serve the central authorities and teachers and departmental autonomy are subordinated.
•Moving to an increasingly precarious workforce, especially in teaching.
•Increasing use of a retail consumer model for managing the student body
•Directly politically intervening in local affairs at public institutions, especially by governors, legislators, and wealthy donors.
•Corporate manipulating of curriculum fads such as MOOCs
•Directly attacking the humanities and most social sciences, and even STEM science regarding issues such as climate change

Thus we see a churn of issues, such as the upward spiraling costs for students who are pushed into debt-financing their education before entering the job market. And while there is a push to "restore" traditional education, and to enforce regimentation for the workplace, we have a different student body than the old norm. Demographic change, propelled by generational change, means campuses are much more diverse, racially and ethnically, as well as in terms of gender. Add to this the greater presence of international students, and students whose families represent different types and stages of immigration, and diversity itself looks different than a few decades ago. Neoliberalism and globalization have already changed the workplaces students will enter in the future. Rather than a future of lifetime corporate employment, or the stability of unionization, and the expectation of one person providing for a household, most students now face a "career" of precarious employmnet, endless retraining, and a high probability of losing ground.

We can reasonably expect that young people form an essential core for activist change. They have more hope, fewer binding commitments, more energy, and self-interest in seeking progressive change. When they can combine with deep rooted community resources and experience, they are virtually unstoppable, as the recent progress in exposing (though not ending) police shootings, racial profiling, and militarization. In addition, young adults acting according to changing social norms and expectations, we've witnessed on campuses in particular their politicized focus on issues of race and diversity, of sexual assault and gender equality. For example, when the federal education act was originally passed in 1972, the main effect of Title IX in assuring gender equality for women in high education turned on funding for women's athletics. And so it remained for many years, but highly publicized incidents of sexual assault in the military came to command attention in Congress (and significantly brought forward by women legislators, now a larger presence on the national stage).

With a federal standard set against sexual assault and harassment in the military, and in government, it became obvious and clearer that similar standards should be implemented in terms of schools receiving federal funding. Thus, while the now famous "Dear Colleagues" letter, from the Department of Education in 2011, announced a new level of scrutiny appeared rather late, once in place and after some beginning enforcement began in the Obama administration, the move gained a momentum, along with a new attention to diversity and bias issues (expanded to include wider gender issues of transsgender, of expanded ideas of disability, and so on), This has been welcome for shifting attention to the issue and justice for those affected, yet Title IX compliance has been often hastily introduced and wildly uneven in effectiveness. At its worst, offices have been set up and policies created with little skill or nuance. Some programs were charged with creating policy and rules, and with carrying on investigations, as well as evaluating the results and judging the parties involved, and determining the punishments or rewards. With no checks and balances, due process was often truncated. New "Bias Assessment Response Teams" went off to examine individual complaints (on the positive side, all complaints had to be investigated), but without an equivalent "Common Sense Response Team" to provide level

headed procedural process and stop some BARTs' overreach into classroom content and attempts to police academic speech.

Compounding this, the vast expansion of social media communication created the ability for blunt statement, rumor, and crude or false information to flow rapidly throughout a community. This combined with an increasingly polarized public space, itself exemplified by the Republican and right-wing decision to obstruct everything that Obama tried to do. It worked out in the 2016 Presidential electoral campaign, when pitched battles became more common. And with Trump providing cover, and his win unleashing the barking dogs of racism and sexism, a new level of confrontation appeared.

Two particular problems presented themselves and show the need for a more sophisticated way of thinking (and teaching) about the central issues. First is the nature of a flexible, evolving, and principled understanding of justice. The very definitions of racism, sexual violence, harassment, and appropriate responses have been changing. An interesting case study is captured in an article about a class two faculty taught about free expression and the First Amendment [Erwin Chemerinsky and Howard Gilman, "What Students Think about Free Speech," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 3 2016]. They quickly discovered that students had a different idea than they did about what the ground rules for public discourse should be. The professors realized that since the early 1990s, primary and secondary education has taken on the task of confronting bullying in schools. One positive result is that students are far less likely to enact or accede to bullying behavior. But the downside is that they are much more likely to want to shut down disagreeable discourse and action without thinking about the consequences for free speech and dissent. Thus they are likely to accept and even ask for institutional regulation of things they don't like which ends up giving much greater authority to governing institutions and leaving its administrators unchecked.

At the same time, in response to some clear cut violations of protections for free speech on campuses, a rising chorus on the Right has agitated under the banner of a First Amendment absolutism to not just allow but in many cases to encourage extreme and hostile expression. Criticizing campus actions such as diversity education, ridiculing "safe spaces," "trigger warnings," and "microagressions," calling concerned students "special snowflakes," and denouncing "political correctness" (not knowing that the very term originated in the New Left to mock left sectarians), Right wing pundits who have never been known to do anything about racism and sexism have wrapped themselves in the righteousness of the First Amendment. In most cases (with a few again obvious exceptions) upon investigation the situation looked different. Campuses have had "safe spaces" where students can gather with others who respect their bonds for decades: Hillel Foundations, campus churches, Muslim prayer rooms, Women's Centers, Black Student Centers, and so forth. Most "trigger warnings" are already in place when instructors choose a course title and readings and screenings: History of the Civil Rights Movement in the US, Global Warming and the Artic Environment, Pornography in the Media, Sexual Assault and Criminal Law, etc. and experienced teachers know how to moderate hot button classroom discussions.

The recent political campaigns pushed antagonisms and self-righteous bluster while encouraging bigotry, especially on the Right. We found one of the best commentaries on free speech core issues in a "campus report" from PEN America, "a nationwide community of more than 4,000 novelists, journalists, poets, essayists, playwrights, editors, publishers, translators, agents, and other writing professionals." *And Campus for All: Diversity, Inclusion, and Freedom of Speech at U.S. Universities* does a beautiful job of balanced explanation and suggesting paths to better solutions. And it's available as a free PDF download from pen.org.

One of the legacies of the Sixties that is worth remembering, preserving, and creating anew is to critique and improve education. The inexorable trend of neoliberalism is to deny the social, the commons, the interdependence of our lives. Neoliberalism needs to force autonomy on people, claiming to celebrate individuals and choice, but only for the purpose of turning a profit, as with all the variations of soft drinks or shampoos for consumers. When students are viewed as just consumers, schools become marketplaces. When college is treated as just a pipeline to an existing corporate –defined job, genuine education is replaced with sterile certification.

But the Sixties saw the creation of alternatives: of student generated courses; of free universities; of alternative gathering places such as churches and coffeehouses (including significantly, GI coffeehouses during the war); of study groups; of organizations for social, cultural, and political change that ran internal education as part of their activities; of bookstores featuring black, latino, women's, gay, leftist writing; of artist-run art galleries; performance and screening venues and series programmed from grassroots interests. The collective aspects of cultural projects, both among those organizing events and serving a community audience, are invigorating. Cultural space works against the competitiveness and isolation of individual cultural bubbles. A broad and diverse cultural sphere projects an alternative and utopian vision. That's the groundwork for real learning, learning together, in dialogue, for change.

Chuck Kleinhans
Julia Lesage

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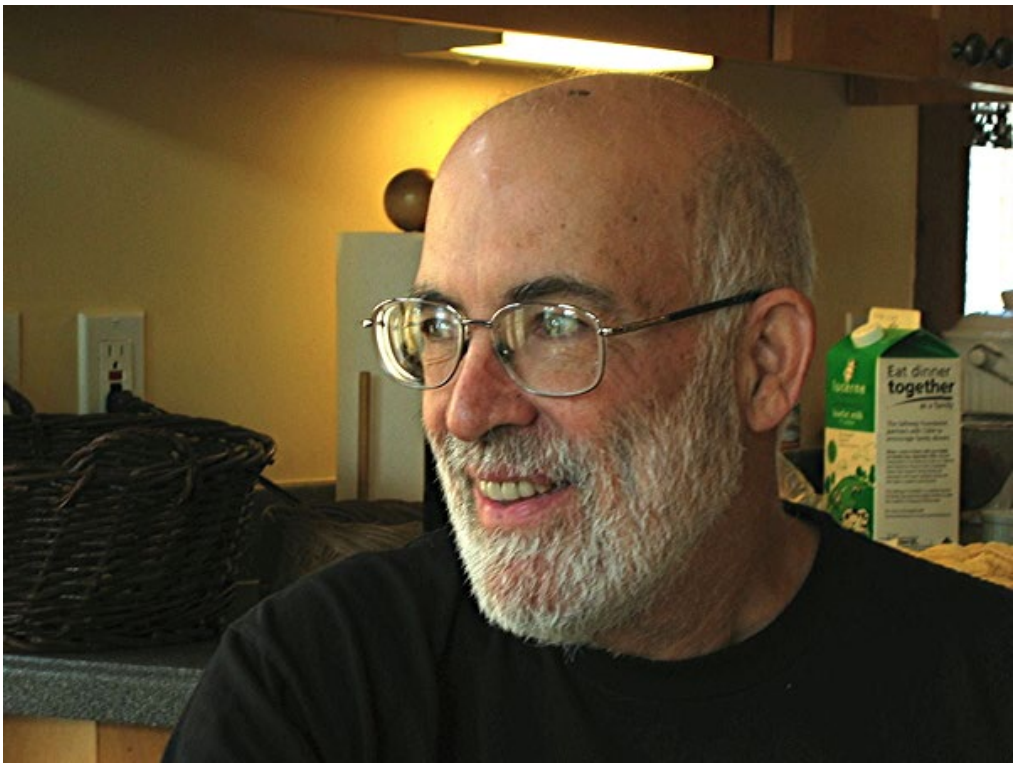
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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Remembering John Hess

by Chuck Kleinhans



My *JUMP CUT* co-editor, John Hess, died on August 14, 2015 from complications following his living with Parkinson's Disease. Friends and family had opportunities to see him in his last months. He died at home with caregivers present, as he wished. John's wife, Gail Sullivan, died of cancer a few years earlier after a career as a labor organizer with the Teamsters for a Democratic Union and the California Nurses Union. John was survived by his two sons, Andy Hess and Sean Sullivan and their families.

John will be remembered by many people as an important labor organizer, particularly for part time and contingent teachers in the college and university system. While at San Francisco State University, he participated in the successful effort to unionize the faculty in the California State University system. Thereafter he worked to organize the contingent faculty (full and part time temporary) and served in several elected and appointed leadership positions in the California Faculty Association (CFA). After returning to California from the East Coast in the late 90s, he worked as a staff member for the CFA for seven years, especially responsible for organizing the contingent faculty. He was honored for his pioneering and exemplary work in spring 1915 at a national meeting in Los

Angeles. He was able to attend and receive the personal well wishes of the national crowd attending. A recognition of John's work in teacher organizing can be found here: http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/LastWordHess/index.html

John will also be remembered as a teacher. He taught as a TA in Comparative Literature at Indiana University, where we first met as grad students. He also taught as a lecturer at Sonoma State, at San Francisco State (for 14 years), and at American University and the University of Maryland. He also taught as an Associate Professor at Ithaca College. Some of John's happiest memories were of his former students who had gone on becoming involved in film, political activism, and community engagement. I was with him many times when a former student would come up and say how he had touched their life. This made him immensely proud and pleased. John saw his work as a teacher as encompassing much more than the traditional academic classroom. He was active in the 1970s in the East Bay Socialist School where he taught introductory courses on Marxism. With the Berkeley JUMP CUT collective of the 70s and 80s he shared the practical knowledge of putting out a radical publication and developing a politically informed film aesthetics. While there were scheduled weekly meetings, in fact the house was a 24/7 locus of political filmmakers, critics and students, and assorted people passing through town who carried on a running dialogue about politics, media issues, and life in general. His work with lecturers in the Cal State system was aimed at teaching them the most effective strategies and tactics to gain empowerment. Here his work was truly ground-breaking. John moved the lecturers from being a kind of accidental after-thought in Cal State system unionizing to its rightful place as representing the majority of the classroom teachers and being closely linked to the concerns of students and communities.

John's contribution as an editor to JUMP CUT's progress and development was fundamental. We first talked of the need for a new political film publication our last year in grad school in Bloomington Indiana. Our partners got teaching jobs and we were trailing them and thought we had time on our hands. So it seemed sensible to start a film publication even though we were over 2000 miles apart and had to communicate mostly by mail (no email, and long distance phone calls were prohibitively expensive at that time). Crazy idea, but we did it with the help and encouragement of others.

John came to his left politics not from theory or sudden passion but from life experience. On graduation from college he joined the Army and went through military language school, learning Russian. His Cold War post was in rural Germany listening to Soviet tank drivers maneuvering in East Germany. (Ironically, they were like him, away from home in a foreign country.) He also learned German from locals in bars, something that horrified his German teachers when he went back to graduate school for formal instruction. He returned to the US with the student and anti-war movement underway, but his approach was as a veteran. When he arrived in the Bay Area in the early 1970s, he circulated in the fluid movement of New Left activism, radical political filmmaking, and a new critical intellectual climate. Engaging with new political movements and forms such as feminism, gay/lesbian perspectives, as well as the established post Civil Rights black and Chicano movements, and viewing new films from around the world produced the need for a better understanding.

Reading in socialism and Marxism provided a crucial perspective. But John was also fascinated with the actual lived experience of socialism. He travelled in East Germany on research during graduate school and returned around the fall of the Berlin Wall with an interest in the lives of the people he met above all else. Similarly with his visits to Cuba and Nicaragua and El Salvador: the people, not the politicos, celebrities or manifestoes were what mattered.

John and I shared that leftist learning experience along with others on the *JUMP CUT* staff. I think our mutual stubbornness kept us bonded together, but also our shared values and complementary interests. As an editor John was always clear, direct, and pragmatic, measuring submitted articles against his own undergraduate students horizons. What would they get out of an article, could they understand the argument? Equally important John had a comfortable and determined view of the economic realities of self-publishing. For decades he kept us afloat and moving along running the business end of *JUMP CUT* along with the pragmatics of pasting up and laying out an issue, and mailing it off to subscribers and bookstores.

Perhaps this reflected his upbringing in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. His father was a businessman and his mother returned to her Mennonite roots later in life. The combination of practicality and a plain and simple life marked his daily behavior and his spirituality that often took the form of meditation, fasting, and retreat. But that was balanced with a love of activity: sports when he was younger, running and walking when older and for a long stretch canoeing as part of a club. He sometimes arrived from a week on the rivers needing massage and a hot tub and laughing about how he was getting too old for this.

John's personal life involved several marriages (and divorce) to remarkable women. Through it all he was a proud father of his two sons, Andy Hess and Sean Sullivan. Andy grew up mostly in Germany to which his mother returned, but spent summers with John and went to college at San Jose State. A very talented electric bass musician, Andy has played with blues, rock and jazz musicians around the world. John loved attending Andy's shows and supported his artist son's goals and choices. John met Sean well into Sean's boyhood and stood by him during some stormy and trying times (for all concerned) as Sean found his way, emerging as a successful businessman involved in local area moving and a rare items record store. When Sean's mother, Gail Sullivan, was diagnosed with cancer, John worked alongside her in the decade-long medical process, and Gail in turn shared her own understanding when John was diagnosed with his own progressive debilitating disease.

As a writer and critic John's strongest editorial commitments were to the politics of Hollywood film, typified in his classic article on *Godfather 2* which ran in an early issue of *JUMP CUT*. And equally important was the actual practice of political filmmakers. He quickly developed a great interest in Latin American film and filmmakers, travelling to Cuba, to Nicaragua and El Salvador and to Mexico, and meeting filmmakers who passed through the Bay Area. John was especially sensitive to the artist's difficulty of seeing a film project through to the end and dealing with the recurrent issues of organization, finance, the group effort, distribution and exhibition as well as the politics and aesthetics of a particular media work.

Parkinson's is a progressive and irreversible disease, different for every individual. John was diagnosed about 7 years ago and was conscious of planning as much of his life as possible from that point on. When the disease kept him from being able to write and progress on some of his projects he was bitterly sad at not being able to complete a project he knew was important. He continued to be an active part of the *JUMP CUT* editorial team as a critical reader until his last year, and I had the opportunity to review his archived JUMP CUT materials which we expect to go to an appropriate site. An extensive set of interviews he conducted with East German filmmakers in the later 1970s and early 1980s has already been deposited in an archive at the University of Massachusetts. A series he did with US independent documentary political filmmakers, essentially people who had been involved nationally with the aftermath of the New Left Newsreel group will also be archived shortly. A collection of important materials on Latin American

cinema is now at Hong Kong University.

John was my closest male friend through my adult life. We bonded over shared values, shared politics, and a shared commitment to trying to change the world for the better. As a teacher and critic John wanted to help people understand the world so they could be smart in changing it. As an editor he wanted to help writers connect with diverse readers. As a political activist he wanted to empower people at the grassroots level. By necessity we had to meet in person, and that began in the summer of 1974 with me heading out to Berkeley to hash out the pragmatics and idealist goals we had for *JUMP CUT*. That annual extended time together, supplemented by his trips to Chicago and connecting at conferences and festivals, welded us into a tight bond. But rather than critiquing manuscripts and solving layout hassles, or listening to way too much of KPFA talk radio (one of John's addictions), what I remember most is John's incredible generosity. When I had to pack up and leave my Chicago household, he came in the middle of a bitter winter to help, knowing my packrat ways would have to be tamed, and with plenty of boxes and tape. When I took my last drive from Chicago to Oregon in 2009, he joined me travelling across the upper Great Plains with a soundtrack of Rightwing Radio (we provided a running sarcastic response) but mostly jazz and rhythm and blues (the one audio experience we always agreed on). In fall 2014 we did another trip, drastically short due to John's physical limits, to Salinas to visit the new Steinbeck museum, and over to Monterey where John attended language school for a year back in the 60s. These close personal times are a treasure to me. John was the finest man I've ever met.



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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

John Hess
and a radical film journal's history

by Julia Lesage



I first met John in the early seventies when we both were graduate students in Comparative Literature at Indiana University. He had been in the U.S. Army in Germany and was familiar with European cinema, and I had been teaching in South America and knew conversational Spanish and about Latin American film. From the very first, *Jump Cut* had an international focus due to these comp lit origins. Furthermore, at that time film in universities was more a matter of aficionado gatherings than formal studies, and the film lovers on campus often saw each other at the local art theater and film club. In this vein I remember, for example, that once a beautiful print of Rouben Mamoulian's *Applause* came in for some film class, and about fifteen of us spread the word to each other so we could gather around a 16 mm projector to view the film and marvel at its mise-en-scene and feminist message.

Chuck Kleinhans and I were left feminists; John and his then wife Judy were university upstarts, writing a denunciation of campus politics that they published anonymously in the underground paper, *Common Sense*. Judy and I got jobs; the guys didn't. Chuck and I moved to Chicago and John and Judy to California. By way of continental letter writing, John and Chuck became co-editors of the new journal, *Jump Cut*. After a divorce, John moved to Berkeley, California, where he taught film part-time for many years at San Francisco State University and also taught Marxism as a volunteer at the East Bay Socialist School. These were our

years of working on a journal in paper format. We had a collective in both Chicago and Berkeley to read and comment on manuscripts, to write letters to authors, to do paste-up, to proofread, and even to organize thousands of printed copies of an issue to prepare it for bulk mailing.

But there were regional differences between the two collectives as Chuck and I discovered when travelling to Berkeley and found that the West Coast Group began meetings with each person responding to the question, "What space are you in?" And that group often concluded with a meal out followed by a group soak in a commercial hot tub! More seriously, John effectively handled the business end of the journal, and both he and we dealt with one of the biggest problems of editing print media: what to do with back issues? Our various apartments in Chicago were filled with them, as was Chuck's mother's house. John's storage problems were partly solved when he finally moved into a house in Oakland that had a finished garage that became the *Jump Cut* House. When we finally became an electronic publication, costs were less and I took charge of layout (it's not something you can do collectively). Our contact with each other and with our editorial board became more a matter of email correspondence and not group meetings. And through all these years Chuck and John and I stayed in personal contact with each other by phone.

John was an easy going, gentle man. His writing from a Marxist perspective is still perceptive and does not seem to have aged. Some of his essays that remain models of clarity include theoretical explanations, such as "La politique des auteurs" (in two parts) and "Film and Ideology"; the many editorials he wrote first with Chuck Kleinhans, and then with Chuck and myself; and his reviews of films depicting the working class such as *The Cockfighter*; *Matewan* and *The Sicilian*; and *Voices from a Steeltown*. John had a special fascination with *The Godfather* films and the way they treated patriarchy; his essay on Godfather II has been anthologized and taught in many classes, and his writing's force here draws from the way he ties the film to his own life:

> "I think the film affected me so powerfully even after several viewings because it presents and plays on most of the now threatened bourgeois values which I was taught to believe in and respect—family ties, social mobility, the quest for security and respectability in a competitive world, the friendship between men engaged in the same work, the importance of religion, and individualism."

In addition to these intellectual areas, John had a longstanding interest in Latin America film; after graduate school he learned Spanish and traveled in Latin and Central America, resulting in articles where he used film to explain aspects of other cultures to people in the United States. He traveled to Cuba and wrote essays about Cuban film (e.g., "Two Films of Manuel Octavio Gomez"). He helped organize a U.S. trade union group in solidarity with El Salvador and traveled to a trade union conference there ("Labor/solidarity work's new possibilities") and he went on a month-long solidarity project to Sandinista Estelí, Nicaragua, where he remained for the full time in spite of serious illness.

As I write these words and think of John's stick-to-it-ness, I am reminded that all three of us *Jump Cut* editors used to joke with each other that we all came from German stock and that's why we each were so stubborn. Looking back on it now, I can see that all of us thought of our political work as something we were into for the long haul. We each put into an issue's printing cost about $1000; I called it Tithing for Your Art. We never applied for grants because we did not want to live beyond our means. We printed on newsprint with offset printers, the bargain basement of printing, the kind used to print grocery fliers. Later, when we went to electronic publication, I could get a new computer with the money that John had

saved for us. John worked as a contingent (part-time) teacher and never forgot that experience, becoming the head of a major organizing drive that successfully unionized California's contingent faculty; now it is a model for such organizing in the United States. We always saw ourselves belonging to a counter-culture. It's a concept that began in the sixties and seventies and has served *Jump Cut* well. I shared that vision with John and it will sustain me in the years to come. Thank you, John, for being such a steady part of my life.

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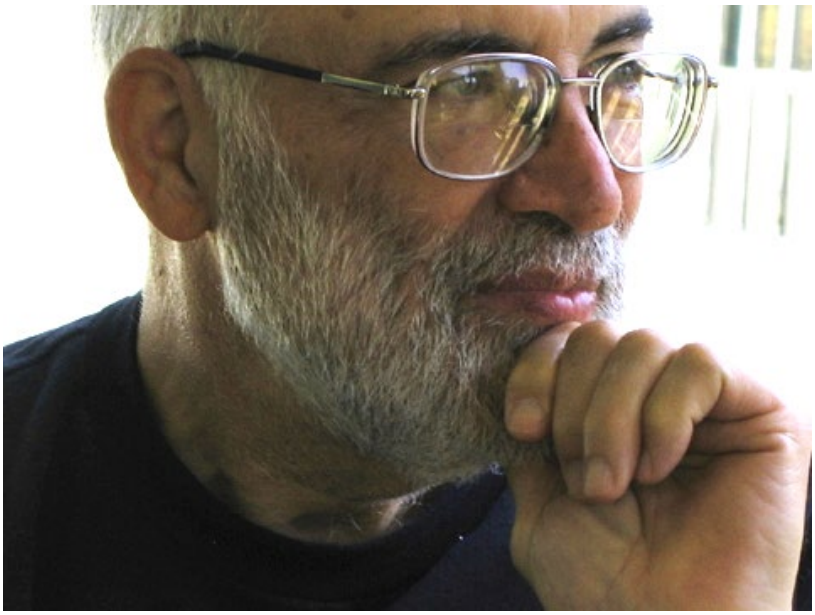


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JUMP CUT
A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

¡Viva John Hess!

by Patricia R. Zimmermann



John ambled into our log home for a dinner party with a case of red wine atop his shoulder and a smile so large it filled the house. My partner, Stewart Auyash, and I asked why he was giving us a whole case. He answered: we had cooked meals for him so many times he wanted to thank us in a big way.

John was my colleague in screen studies at Ithaca College from 1992 to 1998. I had been teaching there since 1981. After he accepted the tenure-line job to teach narrative film in what was then called the Department of Cinema and Photography (now the Department of Media Arts, Sciences, and Studies), he sent me a typed letter about coming to the East Coast from Oakland. On a yellow sticky note, he had scrawled, “And beyond all that, it will be fun to work together.”

One of our departmental colleagues always marveled at John’s ability to exude happiness…all the time. She mused that you could only be that happy, grounded, and collegial if you felt truly loved by all your family. John would saunter down the halls of the third floor of the Roy H. Park School of Communications, popping into faculty offices to chat about the news or campus gossip. He would hang out in the mail room, talking passionately about books he had just read, movies he had seen, and national and international politics that outraged him. He would always ask colleagues what they were reading.

Genuine happiness—the variety that cascades like a huge waterfall through your walk, your talk, your eyes, your hands, your voice—is as rare as a bluebird in the academy, where negativity and despair often conflate with critique. John was the kind of colleague you wanted to be around. He always asked questions. He loved

digging down into ideas and films and books. He relished analyzing the power structures of Ithaca College. He laughed at those who tried to shrink faculty rights.

Ever the organizer and activist, John was a gift to the Department of Cinema and Photography. His impact persists, like a perennial iris that bursts into large purple flowers and then multiplies and spreads. When John arrived, he was assigned to teach the "bread and butter courses," those foundational film-studies courses required for the major, which production students often dread and malign: Introduction to Film Aesthetics and Analysis, and Fiction Film Theory.

John gutted the contents of both courses. He assessed them as too American-centric, too conventional, too white, too male, too traditional. He had spent decades deconstructing assumptions about film studies through his work on the Oakland-based collective that produced the field-shifting journal *Jump Cut*: *A Review of Contemporary Media,* for which he was a founding coeditor. He argued that the courses needed to show experimental films if only to disturb students' preconceptions and open them up just a little bit to a more pluralistic view of cinema. He did not enact the course renovations alone, however. We would go out to lunch, where he would drink many cups of coffee. He shared his analysis and plans for revision. He asked what I thought. He counseled me: The only activity one should ever do alone in the academy is write up your research. The rest of what we do, he said, we should always do with one another.

John internationalized the two courses by introducing films from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe as well as multicultural content from the United States. He fearlessly disrupted students' perceptions of cinema. He nudged them into urgent conversation with a larger world. He enjoyed functioning as a sort of lifeguard in the roiling seas of the film-studies classroom, throwing students into the deep end of crashed expectations about Hollywood's industrialized cinema. He was always there for them with his soul-deep smile and expansive affect, throwing out intellectual life jackets as needed or yanking students out of waters too turbulent for their level of critical acumen.

It feels as though John is still here, pushing us to consider our courses as international and formal heterogeneous organisms, existing to cultivate new utopias with our students. Over the seventeen years since John left Ithaca College, the screen-studies faculty members—whether just out of graduate school, in early or mid career, or seasoned senior professors—often ask for stories about his time there. They take the pedagogies John instituted to other colleges and universities. Grace An, Jane Glaubman, Matt Holtmeier, Dale Hudson, Christina Lane, Gina Marchetti, Lisa Patti, Claudia Costa Pederson, Leah Shafer, Anna Siomopoulos, Andrew Utterson, Chelsea Wessels, and Harvey Young have team taught the courses John originated. They have continued a conversation with his radical insurgencies to look outside the canon and the expected to invite students into the many worlds of cinema. The same colleagues ask about John's work with *Jump Cut*. Through John's legacy in our department, I suspect these professors feel connected to larger movements in film culture beyond career advancement and a small college in rural upstate New York. The memory of John is organizing us to operate in collective ways, to be resolutely in the world, to refuse dominant ideologies, to ignore anyone who would rob us of our collegiality.

John also motored the large lecture course on Hollywood that my department has now offered for more than two decades. The concept was his idea…as a proactive, pro-faculty response to the negative feedback from chairs and administrators that elective film studies (especially my courses, with their historical orientation) did not appeal to students who were more interested in hands-on production. Rather than grousing about lowering academic standards to consumerist ideologies about

education, John figured out how to reverse engineer the situation. For advice he called his *Jump Cut* comrades Chuck Kleinhans and Julia Lesage. He rang up friends at other universities, one of whom was Scott MacDonald, the scholar of experimental film who at the time was at Utica College. From them John learned that many schools offered courses called "Hollywood" as a tactic to lure students through direct appeal to their fantasies about the entertainment industry; an academic course on Hollywood could then hook students with dynamic screenings, critical historiography, and political economy to propel deeper understanding. I doubt anyone would ever guess that a founder of *Jump Cut* concocted a course at Ithaca College named "Hollywood." The first time I offered the course, it was overenrolled. We teach it every spring, and it fills every seat in the lecture hall. Thank you, John.

John wafted through my heart and mind this past academic year (2015-16). The part-time faculty at Ithaca College unionized. The contingent one-year appointed faculty inaugurated a successful union drive. In August campus security unfairly harassed African American students. In October, J. Christopher Burch, a billionaire white male alumnus of Ithaca College and CEO of Burch Creative Capital, spoke at a large all-campus forum called "Blue Sky" that the upper administration concocted to reimagine higher education. Burch argued that books and classes were outdated and made disparaging, racist comments about Indonesians. He called a young, twenty-something African American female alumna on the same panel a "savage" after she stated that she possessed a "savage hunger" to make her career happen.

The campus erupted in political actions about race, diversity, and inclusion. Reporters from the *New York Times, Al Jazeera,* and other news organizations fluttered in like rare butterflies to cover the political gatherings held to fight racism, centralized management practices, and corporatization of the academy. In a nationally unprecedented event, the students voted no confidence in Ithaca College president Tom Rochon. The faculty voted no confidence, then the staff did the same. The president leaves in July 2017. We won. John would have delighted in the demonstrations, occupations, teach-ins, walkouts, arguments, LISTSERVs, meetings, letters, petitions. He would have encouraged and saluted all the part-timers and untenured assistant professors who attended the rallies and signed the faculty letters of protest published in the student newspaper, *The Ithacan*.

Around 1994, when the anthropology faculty had to spend out a large grant enhancing the expansion of Latin American content across the Ithaca College curriculum, they contacted John, who was a dedicated specialist on and partisan for Latin American cinema. During his time at Ithaca College, he always seemed to be working on his book on Latin American political cinema, which, sadly, was never published. He would read voraciously in this area, watch every Latin American, Mexican, and Cuban film that came to Cornell Cinema, and rent films for his courses. He also met virtually every faculty member at Ithaca College and Cornell University who worked on Latin American cinema, taught Spanish, or showed up at the screenings.

John scored several grants from Ithaca College to support the writing of his book. Looking back, I wondered if the idea of it functioned for John as a passport to connect him with as many political Latin Americanists as possible in our small upstate New York town of thirty thousand. As a result, the humanities faculty with the grant funds knew John from coffees, beers, screenings, and radical politics. He suggested that they dedicate the remaining money to buy 16mm prints of important Latin American films for the college's library so that the works could be more easily taught. The money covered the expense of twelve films—an astonishing number back in the 1990s, when each print cost more than $1,000. Recommended by John, the films included, from Cuba, *Lucía* (Humberto Solás,

1968), *Memories of Underdevelopment* (Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1968), and *One Way or Another* (Sara Gómez, 1974); from Argentina, *The Hour of the Furnaces* (Fernando Solanas/Octavio Getino, 1968); and from Chile, *The Battle of Chile: Part I* (Patricio Guzmán, 1975), among others. Most of our screen-studies courses frequently show these titles, which are now on DVD in the library. Through them, John is still with us, pushing us to think widely about all the forms of cinema available. He had insisted, gently and with a smile, that we move ourselves and cinema beyond the borders of the United States, and we have.

In the 1990s the notion of the transnational ripped open critical studies, both the globalized corporate transnational that rewired capital and the insurgent radical transnational that fought it. Both iterations dislodged and dismembered the national, a key term in cinema studies. Soon after John arrived at Ithaca College, he and I decided to create a study group of two to read more. He explained we were each part of a generation of cinema studies that interrogated "the national": he specialized in Latin American cinema, and I worked in American film history.

John's position was simple and elegant: we needed to think together about how to dismantle our own preconceptions. We drank a lot of coffee, in cafes and at his kitchen table. We discussed what this murky, ambiguously defined term "transnational" meant. While we were doing this work, the Zapatistas emerged in Chiapas. John thought they embodied the transnational ethos. He quoted Subcomandante Marcos to me. We co-wrote and presented a paper for the first Visible Evidence international conference on documentary, held at Duke University in 1993, on transnational documentary. We analyzed international collectives, radical forms of cinema, and new media. These projects confounded and refused borders, reformulating a politics of solidarity to imagine new ways to think about the world. We were fascinated how the idea of the transnational—the radical kind—was shifting documentary into new terrains and territories.

From here John and I assembled panels on transnational documentary at a few more Visible Evidence conferences hosted at various universities. John always insisted that our panelists gather together beforehand over many dinners and lunches. He wanted us to operate as a collective, to share stories about labor issues at our universities, to laugh together, to embody the transnational. He asked so many questions that these private assemblies functioned as little seminars, or radical cells, on thinking about the convergence of the transnational and the digital in documentary.

In writing this tribute to John, I researched what we coauthored on transnational digital documentary. For eight years, from 1993 to 2000, we mounted panels and dialogues on this topic. We published four articles together, in the magazines *Dox* and *Mesh* and the academic journals *Afterimage* and *Wide Angle*. The article for *Afterimage,* "Transnational Documentary: A Manifesto" (1997), was inspired by John's work on third cinema and his admiration for Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino. "Transnational Digital Imaginaries" (2000) for *Wide Angle* was about new media and video works. Many of the artists we discussed in the latter piece either went to school or lived in upstate New York. John liked that we centered our work in the place where we lived, an exceptionally vibrant and fertile area for electronic arts and new media with a long history of technological and arts innovation. The article was reprinted in a book called *Transmedia Frictions: The Digital, the Arts, and the Humanities* (University of California Press, 2014) edited by Marsha Kinder and Tara McPherson. I see "Transnational Digital Imaginaries" cited in articles. Graduate students will sometimes contact me about it. I know that that work, and the connections it spawns, would not have been possible without John.

John and I shared a fantasy: we would coedit an anthology called *Transnational*

Documentary. We talked about its shape and potential contributors over many more coffees and glasses of red wine. We contacted people on our various panels at conferences to see if they might join in. We even presented the idea to some university presses.

Unfortunately, the editors at one press did not treat our proposal with the kind of respect that John thought every individual deserved. I do not remember all the details, but I think they solicited the book and then either never responded or thought it was not good enough. When we spotted the editors at a reception at a conference, John wanted to talk to them. He thought they had behaved dishonorably by not treating us or our ideas with respect; he said he would not act as though nothing had happened. I was afraid to confront them—I just wanted to let it go. But John said no. He made me accompany him as he approached them. He laid it out: Why did they pretend to like the idea of this book and then not have the courtesy to say they did not want it? And why did they reject it? The editors were shocked. While I forget the particulars of the interaction, I do remember sensing their discomfort as they sputtered out excuses. John kept smiling, never antagonistic, ever clear, focused, and affable. His lack of anger must have destabilized them. At this point, my takeaway was not remorse over a failed book project but rather, John's gracious way with those with whom he disagreed.

John, who was weary of commuting cross-country, had by this time resigned from Ithaca College and planned to return to Oakland to live full time with his wife Gail Sullivan. He was already working on the organizing campaign for part-time faculty in California's state university system. One of the editors asked John what he wanted and how they could make amends. His answer shocked me: he asked them to donate to the part-time faculty organizing campaign, to do something for faculty with less security and fewer perks than those at elite Research I universities. One of the editors immediately pulled out a checkbook, wrote a check for a sizable amount, and deposited it in John's hands. Afterward, when I asked John why he had confronted the editors, he told me he actually liked and even admired both of them. He said calmly: silence is dangerous and makes you complicit. Then, he laughed. He continued: everyone needs to be reminded that we are all part of something bigger, and that messy, unnameable thing needs all of us.

One summer, John left his Volvo station wagon parked on our land. We were then living south of Ithaca in the country, in a log home surrounded by fourteen acres. To protect the car's exterior from the sun and crow droppings, he draped a gray cover over it. We passed that shrouded car daily, always thinking of John. When he returned to Ithaca after a summer with Gail in Oakland, he brought us a set of five hand-crafted measuring spoons. Each in the shape of a fish, the spoons sported intricate designs of fish scales, eyes, and fins. My hand traced their texture in three dimensions. I asked John why he gave us these gorgeous, unique spoons. He answered something like: because I know that all those dinners you cooked for me depend on the hidden labor of reading recipes and measuring, so when you cook, think of my gratitude for all the people I encountered around your table and all the laughs we shared.

I use those fish measuring spoons nearly every day. I love to cook. I read cookbooks for fun. For me, the spoons evoke the fullness of John's laughter, the densities of his solidarities, the intricacies of his brilliant mind, the verve with which he engaged intellect and life. For John, ideas needed to sizzle and soar. The five spoons of different sizes measure out the power of his stunning clarity that happiness does not emanate from publishing books or even from producing an important political film journal for decades. According to John, happiness could come only from being part of the collective will to rewire college screen-studies courses, library film collections, and anything or everything that takes away our

power.

Sometimes, alone in my kitchen, measuring out thyme or rosemary or cinnamon with the fish spoons, I hear John's crackling laughter and see his expansive smile. I remember something he repeated over and over, a political chant, an incantation, a Zen koan: never work alone, and always have others by your side. For John, those two strategies rallied true happiness. They opened up something he valued beyond films, books, courses, research, writing, publications, conferences, or teaching: the power of people, united.

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